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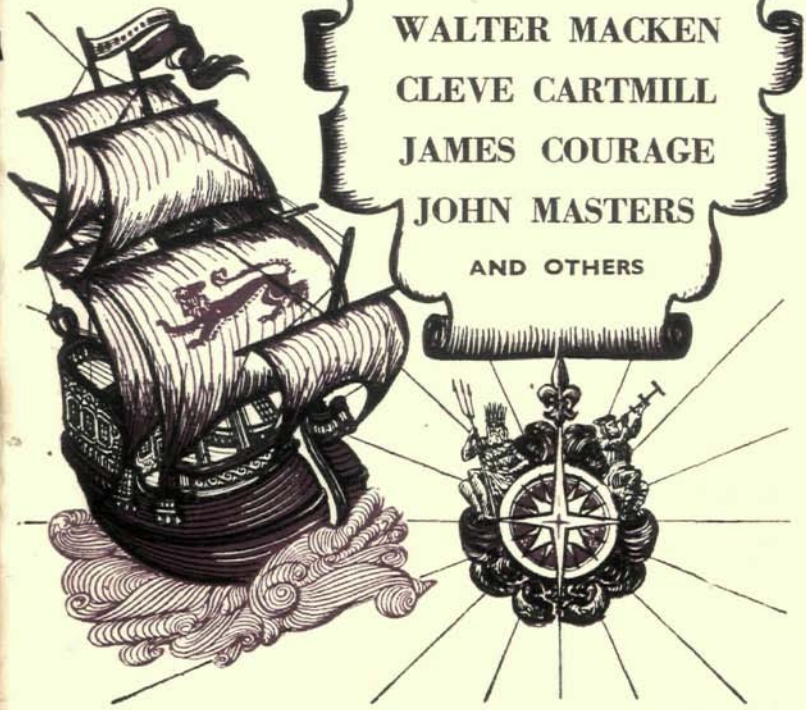

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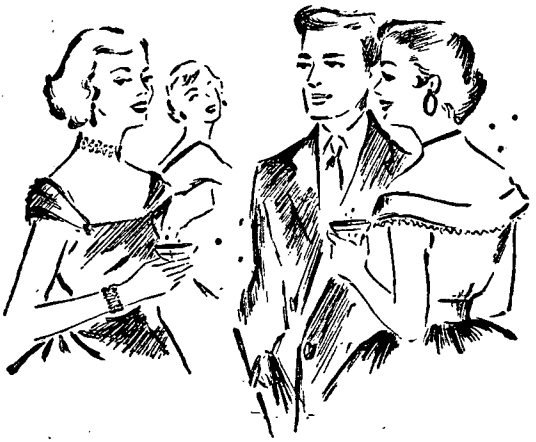

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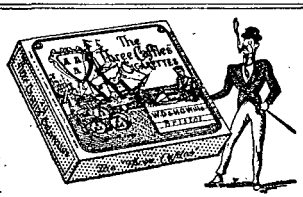


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# ARGOSY

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# Mirage

*AS we, at dawn, tacked with dew-heavy sails*
*Flapping as though yet drowsed with harbour-sleep,*
*Out of the western firth, our waking eyes*
*Saw everywhere phantasmal islands rise*
*And hang suspended sheer*
*Over the calm Atlantic's foamless deep*
*In the still glittering atmosphere—*
*Islands, whose every craggy steep*
*Fantastic turrets crowned—*
*As if, by wizardry*
*In that enchanted dawn*
*From fathomless oblivion drawn,*
*Atlantis, in forgotten ages drowned,*
*Arose again from the remembering sea.*

WILFRID GIBSON

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# PROUD LADY YUN

**Glistening black hair set with jewelled flowers framed her honey-pale face**

**by LESLIE BONNET**

THE season of great heat was being especially oppressive. Old Chengtu, that fat city set in the western plains, sweated within its walls. The watered fields outside it, which ran up to the very ramparts, danced in a green and golden sheen.

Towards early afternoon the humid glare diminished, while the air grew more oppressive. The harsh sun withdrew itself in darkening vapour. A thunderstorm swept down from the icy western mountain barrier. While the thunder rattled in fearful nearness, great spouts of rain emptied the streets.

In the mean street called Happy Goings only Li Hsing remained to brave the storm. He sat stolidly on the uneven pavement, leaning his back upon the wall of the eating-house. Great gouts of water from the swilling roof smote him on head and shoulders. His chin was thrust forward upon his chest. The drenched cotton tunic and pants of faded blue revealed a muscular and agreeable frame. A sodden placard hanging from his neck proclaimed in bold and crudely executed characters that Li Hsing had eaten of a meal in the eating-house and had failed to pay for it.

The fierce cascade was quickly obliterating this announcement; but the situation was too common for anyone to mistake. According to custom, Li Hsing must sit there until the eating-house proprietor had time to deal with him, or until some friend or charitable person, seeing his plight, should set matters right.

And so he sat, while the great raindrops clattered upon the deserted street.

Though what could be seen of his features showed no sign of discomfort or uneasiness, his mind was crowded with unhappy thoughts. He had come into the city early that morning from the small farm which he tended alone. For fifteen dusty li he had trundled the barrow with its flaccid load. The wheel, wooden hub on wooden axle, had squeaked its devil-scaring protest. The pig, roped in the barrow upside down, a few branches of greenery fastened on its belly so that the heat should not reduce weight by perspiration, had protested too, until the steaming heat had quieted it.

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A good sale in the market, a chance meeting, then the sale of the barrow as well, to a keen buyer at a good price, had loosed Li Hsing in the city with money and an appetite.

Alas, when he had risen after a hearty meal in the eating-house he found that his money had been parted from him somewhere, doubtless in the thronging streets. The eating-house proprietor had no partiality for unknown young peasants. That is why Li Hsing now shrank under the lash of rain outside when everybody else sheltered from the storm.

However, as it is said, every trouble must pass, if only to make room for a fresh one, and the storm soon rolled away over the shining plain and the sun groped through tattered and flying clouds to touch with warmth the streets of Chengtu and the chill limbs of the patient Li.

And the people walked in the bright street again and the cries of carriers, the shouts of porters, and the important voices of those who conducted people of consequence all sounded once more in a beautiful hubbub. Li looked up without hope or interest and saw, stationary in the middle of the street, a sedan-chair of exquisite fashion, most delicately decorated. And, while the bearers stood motionless, one who seemed to be a major-domo approached the squatting peasant, with huge dignity and with obvious distaste.

" O nothing," he inquired of Li with carefully calculated condescension, " what is the price of thy release so execrably painted upon this filthy notice? "

Li told him. The major-domo gave a long silken bag of money that he held in one hand a contemptuous shake and stalked into the eating-house.

Meanwhile, Li regarded the sedan-chair with renewed interest. He could see nothing of the occupant, though from an occasional twitching of one of the curtains he was led to believe that he was being observed himself. While he still gazed, the major-domo came out onto the pavement, followed by the eating-house proprietor who was bowing profusely and with great rapidity. And to Li's surprise, he found himself included in the bows and the smiles.

The major-domo stood over Li and motioned him to rise. " The Lady Yun," he said, " has been graciously pleased to pay your score. It will be necessary for you to attend and thank her. Follow the chair, but at such a distance as befits a noisome person."

The major-domo said something deferential to the occupant of the chair. The bearers uttered a despairing cry and took up

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their burden again. And, as the chair moved off, Li padded along behind it, soaked clothing moulded to his broad limbs.

Outside a great silent building that backed windowless on to a little street, the sedan-chair stopped, and a lady, veiled and cloaked in glittering drapery, was assisted out and entered through a heavy door of blackened timber. The major-domo signalled to Li to wait, and followed the lady. Presently he returned and took Li inside.

Li had never seen so rich a place. He followed his mentor through chambers that glowed with colour and sparkled with light. Finally the major-domo pushed Li through tinkling curtains into a room where the light was more dim. At the end of it, standing where a window cast a bright beam of diffused sunshine, was the lady.

She was tall and light and the slim hands that escaped from the long sleeves as they pressed her breasts were of rare fragility. The glistening black hair, piled high, and set with jewelled flowers, framed a face honey-pale, painted redly a little on cheeks and brow. The up-slanting eyes were dark and bright. Delicate nostrils trembled very slightly. The tunic she wore was of peacock blue and the gown beneath it smouldered red. On her face was an expression of complete disdain.

Li stood, shifting his feet uncomfortably in an agony of awkwardness. At last he was able to speak. "This insignificant person," he said, and his uncouth country tongue stumbled over the words, "this insignificant person offers humble thanks and grateful prayers."

The lady stopped him. "You have not suffered any ill from your exposure?"

Li hardly knew what she meant. The thought of a wetting causing anyone any harm had never occurred to him. He nodded ambiguously and bowed again.

"You are strong and in good health?" the lady asked.

Li assured her that he was. The lady drifted towards him with a sighing of silk. She stood beside him and looked up at him searchingly. "Well?" she said.

Li knelt quickly in a humble attitude before her. How firmly his neat head was set upon those great shoulders! Then, rising to his feet, he renewed his thanks and bowed his way out.

He found the major-domo in another room and followed him to the street door where he was handed over to the door-keeper.

This lower official looked at Li with some interest as he let him out. Then, leaving the door agape, he stood gazing after him as he started down the street.

Li hesitated, then glanced back. He saw a spare-looking

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little man with a thin wisp of grey beard carefully filling a long pipe and gazing quizzically at him the while. Li moved slowly back to him. The door-keeper looked up with the grin of the ageing. He gave a jerk with his pipe. "Well, my fine big fellow?"

Li, with awkward curiosity, asked him about his mistress. The little old man was disposed to talk.

"This is the house of the great Lady Yun, young man. Her husband was the Lord Chang, dead these seven years. Very young the Lady was, a wife for only a year or two. The Lord Chang was one of the great ones in this city, a very busy personage. A strange one he was, with his comings and goings and his books and his posts. A very strange one.

"And since then my Lady is a proud lady and most lonely. She enjoys the high esteem of the Governor and of the Magistrate and of such superior persons. But she will live solitary and will allow no man with her. In truth, young fellow, I myself have heard her express herself very strongly on such matters. Fancy that, now. Indeed, I marvel that you should have been admitted in this way, especially such a gross, offensive fellow as you are."

A little hurt at this last remark, Li thanked him for his information and went slowly and thoughtfully out of the city. But when in the cool of the evening he reached the little hut where he lived on his farm, he had turned his thoughts completely from this experience and was planning how to work a little harder to make up for his lost money.

And through the summer days he toiled with all his fresh, brawny strength on the small plot of farm that Heaven had given him. The rice ripened and was cut, and good weather blessed the crop.

And one day when, with several neighbours, Li was threshing the rice, visitors arrived.

With tired muscles and heaving breasts the neighbours were thwacking sheaves of rice onto the edge of a wooden barrel, so that the ears were shaken off and fell inside. So busy were they, that none saw the two approaching men until one of them, speaking in a loud voice said, "Which is the farmer Li Hsing?"

The work stopped and Li stepped forward with a courteous smile. The two men immediately seized him roughly, one at each arm. Li shook them off and sent them sprawling. The men got to their feet, shouting with alarm.

"Ignorant malefactor!" cried one. "To assault the tax collectors! This thief owes six taels of silver in taxes. We are sent by the Governor to apprehend him."

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Li's companions fell back, and he himself stepped forward with a smile that asked pardon for his rudeness. He owed no taxes and, in his simplicity, thought it only necessary to explain this.

The two officials would listen to no excuses. They threatened to return with soldiers if Li showed further resistance, and so persuaded him to be led away.

Along the dusty road, through the golden fields, Li was led towards Chengtu. As they came nearer to the city so the cries of his two conductors increased; and, as they pushed a way through the crowded east gate, they were already proclaiming loudly that here was a dangerous ill-doer whom they had captured, and, for the enjoyment of the crowd, they were explaining in some detail the personal discomforts to which he would shortly be put.

Li bore it all with puzzled resignation and was hurrying along between his captors with crowd-placating smiles when a shout brought the three to a halt.

It was the major-domo. He stood in the street before them and called loudly upon them to stay their steps.

Within a trice the bewildered Li was released by the tax officials and was following the major-domo down the street. His conductor turned and addressed him. "Well for you, young fellow," he said in rather more agreeable tones than formerly, "that the Lady Yun heard of your plight."

Li could not but agree with him and considered it marvellous that one so great should have heard of his trouble so quickly.

For the second time within a month he found himself in the dim-lit room, thanking the Lady Yun.

This day she wore a simple silken gown of palest blue, in the style that a peasant girl would have worn on a day of festival. Li thought she looked more beautiful than he had remembered. But, though her words were kind, her manner was still tinged with contempt.

When he had thanked her Li was invited to seat himself and drink a cup of tea. When the tea was come, the Lady Yun waited upon him herself. Li thought this extremely condescending of her, and he congratulated himself and drank his tea with clumsy enjoyment. Then he rose and renewed his thanks and excused himself, saying that he must return and help with the threshing.

The Lady Yun smiled coldly into his eager, lean face. "Of course," she said, "the threshing must mean much to you."

Li was led out in the same manner as before. As they went Li heard a crash in the room he had left. No doubt the lady had dropped some ornament, he thought to himself. The

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major-domo muttered and walked faster. As he went out into the street, Li heard the door-keeper chuckle, though there was nothing at which to laugh.

It has frequently been remarked that once the attention of evil spirits is drawn to a person he becomes the victim of successive shocks. Therefore, Li was scarcely even surprised when a week later, as he travelled back from Kwan Hsien one evening, four fellows of ruffianly aspect leapt out at him as he passed through a grove of trees and threatened him with very wicked-looking swords.

Li could not understand why bandits should seize upon a person so obviously poor; but he did not think it wise to discuss this point with them, and therefore allowed himself to be led away with the very minimum of fuss.

"Perhaps," he thought to himself, "the number of their band has been depleted by death and they wish to add to themselves some stout fellows." And he even pondered whether it would not be to his own advantage to take up such a profession and to forsake the farming occupation where one seemed to be the butt of every ill-wisher.

But the robbers did not broach this subject to him. Their headquarters were in a warren of ruined buildings only some seven li from the city walls of Chengtu; and here he was treated with rough kindness, shared the bandits' excellent evening meal and went to sleep in some discomfort, but with a simple trust that all would turn out well.

And in the morning his confidence was justified; for, only two hours after the sun had risen, the aloof figure of the major-domo of the Lady Yun stalked majestically into the bandits' den. What passed between them Li did not hear; but within the hour he was following the major-domo back towards Chengtu.

And when the afternoon was young he was once more in the now almost familiar presence of the lovely Lady herself. She wore but a loose gown of a soft greenness. Li felt quite uncomfortable in that he had obviously disturbed her when at rest. He thanked her with an ease which practice was beginning to perfect in him. But the Lady herself seemed to lose her confidence as her protégé increased his.

"It is almost as if she were afraid of me," said Li to himself with some amusement, as he saw the swift colour come and go on her cheeks, and as he marked the hand that trembled as she touched the flowers in her hair. However, it was not his place to wonder or surmise, and he contented himself with profuse thanks.

The Lady Yun asked him how the harvest had fared, and then,

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how he lived, what he ate, and many such aimless questions. And as he answered her truly, she looked up at him in a wistful manner.

"It is as if she seeks to stay me," thought Li, and laughed at his foolish thought. "She must in truth be very tired." And he offered his renewed thanks for his further deliverance.

The Lady Yun smiled agreeably and invited him to be seated; but Li made the excuse that he must hurry home. He was concerned about the health of his water-buffalo.

The lady made a curious remark.

"As you prefer, of course," she said. And then she laughed quite freely and asked Li, "Are you very fond of your water-buffalo?"

"Oh, yes!" said Li warmly, and bowed himself out. As he turned to part the curtains a delicate teacup shattered on the back of his head.

It did not hurt a great deal and Li thought it best not to look round. "These great people have strange ways," he said to himself. "One must take the bad with the good." And he went home.

As he went he wondered why the gate-porter had winked at him. Doubtless, it was the small cut on his head that had amused him.

When he was arrested on a false charge of murder about eight days later the simple Li did not even feel concerned. He accompanied the bailiffs to the prison-house with the greatest unconcern. He greeted the lesser gaoler, who received him, with confident friendliness. He felt certain that heaven and the Lady Yun would send the major-domo to him. And so, when next morning the Chief Gaoler paid his customary visit of courtesy, Li expected to see behind him the inevitable stout figure of the Lady Yun's retainer. But to his surprise, the Chief Gaoler was alone. And when, in answer to this man's pleasant inquiry, Li confessed that he had no presents of value to make to him, he was quite astonished to find himself hustled out into a grim yard, where he was seized upon by two villainous-looking creatures who began soundly to beat the great muscles on his shoulders with pliant bamboo poles.

Li was shouting with all his might when the major-domo did arrive. This efficient servant had in fact been detained by an unexpected encounter on his way and was puffing with importance and anxiety when he burst into the yard with the Chief Gaoler.

Loud commands brought the beating to an end and the hapless

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Li was handed over to his official protector with apologies and with pleasant words. This time, as they went towards the great house, the major-domo was so upset that he was more talkative than was his wont.

"Hurry, O fortunate Lord," he panted to the lumbering Li.

Li was astonished at his odd mode of address. "What, sir, must I do now?" he asked.

"It is necessary that you be bathed and have your back dressed and be clothed in seemly raiment," said the major-domo, with every appearance of anxiety and haste. "The great Lady Yun is smashing everything within her sight. I fear for myself, and hope to deserve your intervention, my good Lord, on my behalf."

Li kept up with him as well as he could while they hurried along.

"What can the Lady Yun want?" he asked himself.

Once again, here was the familiar black door. The major-domo drew him on with deferential addresses. The gate porter was bowing.

"Surely these are all mad people," said Li to himself.

* * *

*AUTHOR UNKNOWN*

My arrival at one hospitable house started badly for me. A string of carriages were at the station and I found myself in a brougham with a lady I did not know and who must have swallowed the proverbial poker. Complete silence!

Presently a gentleman joined us, and by way of breaking the sound barrier he asked whether the magazine he had picked up belonged to either of us. A negative sign from my neighbour, so by way of being helpful I answered more fully:

"No, it does not belong to me. I always wonder who reads those stories." (A resurgence of the prig, I fear.)

"I don't read them," replied our companion, "I write them!"

I had no idea who he was. At dinner he turned out to be next to me; splendid, his card would reveal the mystery! The name on the card was Mr. Hawkins, so I still did not know.

He was Anthony Hope: "Prisoner of Zenda" and the rest—and I am glad to say we became friends!

MARIE CAROLA GALWAY, *The Past Revisited*

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# LIGHT OF THE MOON

**Too many salmon were leaving by the back door**

**by WALTER MACKEN**

THE river rose out of the lake that drained the great mountains. They were very tall, stern-looking mountains. They surrounded the lake and kept the shine of the sun from it for the greater part of the day so that it looked gloomier than it was and rather sad. It was high up, and once the river left it, it seemed to become exceedingly jolly as it ran out of the shadow of the mountains.

First it was wide and deep and placid, but as it started to fall on its ten-mile journey to the sea, it narrowed and twisted and foamed and fell and threw up banks of yellow sand where salmon loved to lie. As it got nearer to the coast, it cut its way through tall gorges of rock and it fell over high falls until, in places, it was a rippled, foam-laced interruption cutting the bleak plain, where cattle discontentedly eat at the sparse grass of the poor soil. The nearer it got to the sea, the greater its fall, and here there were high, rounded hills that were very fertile. Trees grew on the hills and they were subdivided and looked green and pleasant under the sun with white cottages built between the fields, and way out beyond you could see great stretches of silver sand where the sea would wink bluely or greyly under the direction of the sky.

And here, a few hundred yards from the estuary, the river was glorious. It fell over a twenty-foot fall in an eternal rumble that never ceased. Many people would walk down to gaze at it there, and you'd think the river knew it was an object of admiration and awe. There were pools above the fall and pools below the fall, and it was very natural that apart from the people who went to admire, there were also people there with long rods in their hands, whose purpose was to catch the powerful fish waiting below to jump the falls or as they rested above, after their supreme accomplishment.

Foolish people who really didn't care about eating salmon would spend hours watching them leaping there; to see the powerful fins catch hold in the white strength of the water, grip it and move the powerful tails and swim up and up and up until they vanished at the top of the fall with a disdainful and triumphant

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flick of their tails. Some of them did not succeed. Sometimes they left a smear of scales and red blood on an outcropping black rock.

But the river was good for a show, either way.

Twenty yards from the falls there was a road that went down to the sea and by the side of the road there was a two-storey house surrounded by a garden that held many spring flowers, and in this house, in a certain room in it, a telephone was ringing. Nothing could be more incongruous than the difference between this occurrence and the river.

It was a square room with shelves all around the walls and a long wooden table and forms and notices hanging up about such things as dipping sheep and precautions against the warble fly, and notices faded and yellow, with small print that few people could take time to read.

A tall young man dressed in the blue uniform of the Civic Guards came in and took up the phone. His tunic collar was opened and a cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth. He looked sleepy. He took up the phone and said, "This is the Barracks," and such a barking and sizzling proceeded to come from the instrument that the young policeman pulled the cigarette from his mouth and dropped it on the floor and ground it with his heel, and then started to button up his tunic. His only words of conversation were: "Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir."

Then he placed the phone back on the table reverently, emitted a cautious sigh and went quickly out of the room. He ran upstairs at the double and knocked at a door from which the sound of singing was coming, entered on a grunt and said, "Sergeant, it's the Chief Superintendent on the phone and he's leppin'."

The Sergeant looked at him from the middle of a soap-covered face. He was wearing trousers and a shirt. His hair was scanty and stood on top of his head. He was a big man wearing a comfortable stomach and blue eyes that were filled with humour.

"Leppin', is he?" the Sergeant asked.

"Mad," said the young man.

"Hmm," said the Sergeant. "What have we done wrong, Moloney?"

"Divil a thing, Sergeant," said Moloney. "What the hell could we do wrong here?"

"The only safe place to say a thing like that," remarked the Sergeant, "is a place called hell. All right. I'll go down and listen to the man."

He didn't hurry himself down the stairs. The young policeman walked impatiently behind him. He was boiling with

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curiosity. It was such a small place they were. Nothing ever happened. Nobody seemed to know they were even in the place. Moloney felt sometimes that people would know more about them if they were in the middle of a desert. For a chief superintendent to call them up was really something big.

The Sergeant took up the phone and sat at the table. "This is the Sergeant," he said. The phone started barking at him.

Moloney knew that the news wasn't pleasant because the Sergeant didn't answer back at all. He just rested his big, half-unshaven face in his hand, listened closely and looked out over the land through the open window. It was obvious that the man at the end of the phone would leave space for an answer, probably in the affirmative. But there would be no answer so he would go on. Eventually he had to run out of words. The yapping was silent, then barked an exasperated query to which the Sergeant gave a slow and considered "Yes," a long pause, and then, "Chief Superintendent," and put back the receiver.

He put both his elbows on the table, and chewed at his knuckles with the nice white teeth that weren't his own. He saw where the waters of the land and sea meet at the estuary and the very white houses along the line of the winding road, and the neat green fields and the reeks of turf piled up.

"That bloody river," said the Sergeant.

Moloney was hopping from one leg to another. "Well, what was it, Sergeant? What did he want?"

"Moloney," the Sergeant questioned him, "is this a bad village?"

"It is not," said Moloney, "more's the pity. Aren't they all like red-blooded saints except on St. Patrick's night?"

"Am I liked in the village, Moloney?" asked the Sergeant.

Moloney considered this. "Well, considering everything, Sergeant," said Moloney, "I think so."

"So we have a respectable village where the police are popular," said the Sergeant. "Do you think this happened overnight, Moloney?"

"I don't suppose it did," said Moloney.

"How right you are," said the Sergeant. "I'm here twenty-three years and if the place is like it is now it's me that med it that way, and I med it that way because I used a bit of me thinkin' apparatus. Listen, Moloney, you have all them philosophers writin' books. If I could write a book about this psychology stuff I'd make a holy show of them fellas. Do you know that?"

"Listen, Sergeant," Moloney burst out. "What the hell did he want?"

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The Sergeant ignored him. He rose, went to the window, and leaned out on the sill through the open window, his balding head in the sunshine.

"And now that damned river has to spoil everything," he said. "Look at it, tumbling its way into the sea, and because of it I have to destroy the hard-thinking work of twenty-three years and have them all again pulling down blinds over their eyes when we meet together on the road."

"I have it," said Moloney, joining him. "It's about the fishing."

"Yes," said the Sergeant. "The river got a new owner lately. You saw him. He kem in here to tell us that any more if we wanted to fish we'd have to give him half of everything we caught. You remember him, a small, sawed-off piece of parasite that never did a day's work in his life with two thin lips on him like a knife slit in skinny bacon. He's been places, that little man, tho' you'd wonder how the bird's legs he has would carry him that far.

"Yes, he's seen the Chief and he's written to the castle and the Dail and the Taoiseach and Dublin Castle and the upshot is that they say we are not co-operating with the worthy owner of the fishery, that too many salmon are leavin' by the back door and that he wants action and they want action. Everybody wants action. I had it all worked out. I know how many fish were leavin' the river. Not a lot. Just enough. They all knew me. I'd put up with a certain amount, they knew. Now I strike. What happens? Forty times the fish will leave the river, and what happens to the village? It will become contrary. I know. They don't know. They don't give a damn. I've built this village. I've reared it like a mother, and now I have to destroy in a night what I built over that little . . ." He banged down the window and sat on the form.

"Why didn't you explain it to the Chief Superintendent?" Moloney asked.

"You're young," said the Sergeant. "You'll learn."

"I see," said Moloney doubtfully.

"So tonight," said the Sergeant, "we go after Mickey."

"But, Sergeant," said Moloney, "Mickey is your best friend."

"I know," said the Sergeant. "That's why." He looked into Moloney's wide puzzled eyes.

"Couldn't we pinch someone unimportant, Sergeant?" Moloney asked.

"You're young, Moloney," said the Sergeant. "You'll learn."

There was a bright moon that night. "You stay here," said

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the Sergeant to the water bailiff. The Sergeant disliked the man. He had sandy hair and prominent teeth so he always seemed to be sneering.

The Sergeant wanted to say to him, "If only you did your job right all this wouldn't be happening." Which was hardly fair. Sandy tried hard but one night about ten years ago when he was really trying he ended up in a deep pool in the river, and had never shown the same enthusiasm for the job since. "If he sees you, it's all up. Come on," he said to Moloney.

The Sergeant had an old raincoat buttoned up around him and an old hat on his head. He went along the favourite side of the river with a short stick in his hand. In the deceptive light it looked like a gaff. He would pause at each pool and he would get down on his stomach as if he were examining the lies. Then he would rise and meander on. He cursed frequently under his breath. He felt very bitter. His heart was heavy. He could see the train of inevitable things that would happen after tonight. After this they would want an army with heavy artillery to keep the whole village away from the river. And they were so blind and stupid that they couldn't see that.

He knew exactly where Mickey would be. And Mickey was there. He knew that Mickey had spotted his manoeuvring—Mickey could see a single horse-fly in the middle of an alder bush. The only thing that would puzzle him would be the identity of the amateur poacher. The Sergeant kept up his wandering, getting closer and closer to the Priest's Pool. It was a pleasant place where the river wound. On the far side, there was a yellow gravel beach. This side, the river flowed free, and by reclining on the thick grass you could caress the water with your fingers.

Mickey was lying stretched there, only his eyes appearing over the edge. He was looking at something in the water. His hand was held by his side. Any minute now, the Sergeant knew, that right hand would flash and a glittering, contorted fish would be rising helplessly in the air.

The Sergeant rose up.

Mickey saw him. He signalled him down. "You fool! You fool!" Mickey said to him in a harsh whisper. "Keep your shadow off the pool."

The Sergeant instinctively ducked, and then rose up and threw away the hat, opened the coat and threw that away.

"I don't know who you are," said the Sergeant, "but I arrest you for the illegal procuring of salmon on another man's river."

He saw the amazement on Mickey's face. It was a pleasant face. Black, virile hair even though he was nearing fifty, a burnt

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face seamed with laughter wrinkles all over it, and blue eyes. He always wore faded brown clothes. They merged better.

Amazement on his face and incredulity. Is this the man I sit and talk with for hours into a morning, while we sip beer and smoke too many cigarettes, and arrange the world between us—what's wrong with politics and religion and the country's youth?

He saw a protest forming on Mickey's open mouth. A protest or something. Was he going to call him Brutus, wondered the Sergeant. Then Mickey threw the gaff on the ground and turned away. There Moloney rose up to face him. Mickey saw the buttons gleaming in the moonlight, and then he turned back and the Sergeant knew he was leppin'.

There was only one way to break free. The Sergeant blocked the way, so Mickey threw himself on the Sergeant.

I'm an old man, the Sergeant thought, as he felt the power of the smaller man in his arms. Squirming like an eel, flicking his body like a powerful fish leaping the waterfall. They fell to the ground clasped in a sweaty embrace. For a moment on the ground they faced one another. The Sergeant was the stronger man. There was sadness in his eyes. They looked at one another. Now is the time for him to spit out a curse and a name at me, thought the Sergeant. To his horror, Mickey just shook his head, released his grip, and relaxed.

At that moment the Sergeant threw the Chief Superintendent out of the window.

" Hit me, Mickey, for heaven's sake," he said.

Mickey was quick. He hit him.

You could hear the Sergeant groaning over in the next four counties. He rolled on the ground, and sat up, holding his head while Mickey was up and away like a shadow. Moloney came.

" Are you hurtit? " he wanted to know.

" I'm dying," said the Sergeant.

" I got a look at him," said Moloney. " I'd know him agin. He ran into the first house up on the road."

" You'll get promotion out of this, Moloney," said the Sergeant bitterly.

" Where's that moron of a water bailiff? " he asked then.

" He's twenty yards away on a hill lookin' at us, Sergeant," said Moloney.

" He would," said the Sergeant, staggering to his feet. Then in a loud voice, " After him, Moloney. We'll get him now on a double charge."

He limped after Moloney. They came to the house. There was no light in it. The Sergeant looked back. Sandy was

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behind them, watching. The Sergeant banged on the door. "Who lives here?" the Sergeant asked.

Moloney had learnt his lesson.

"I don't know, Sergeant," he said. "Maybe I'd know be daylight but you get mixed up in the moon."

"Well, there's one thing sure," said the Sergeant. "We can't break into any man's house without a search-warrant. That's the law. It may be a bad law, but it's the law and that's all there's to it. I'll go and get the search-warrant and you stand guard here at the front door."

"But what about the back door, Sergeant?" Moloney asked. "Couldn't someone slip out the back while I'm watchin' the front?"

"That's a good thought, Moloney," said the Sergeant. He called then in a loud voice to the water bailiff. "Here, you! Come and stand guard at the back door, and hurry up or your man will have slipped out the back while you're comin'. How can I catch poachers when I get no co-operation?" He said this in a loud voice. Sandy came running. "Ye nearly caught him, all right," he said. "But he's holed up proper now."

"Go to the back door," said the Sergeant, "and stay there until mornin' if you have to. I'll have to rouse a justice of the peace for a search-warrant but I'll be back as soon as I can and we'll grab him." It's a good job, he was thinking, that Sandy is as dumb as a bucket of water. "On guard now, mind," he said to them, "and don't let him out of yeer sight. I'll collect the evidence below at the river and I'll be back."

He walked away from them to the river-bank. He was humming a bit. He was thinking, *Well, to hell with it, I'm nearly pensioned off, anyhow, as it is.* He picked up the gaff where it had dropped in the struggle. He went to walk off, started, and paused. What had Mickey been looking at? *Well, it doesn't matter.* He walked on.

Then he walked back. *I'll just look, anyhow.* He got down on his belly and peeped over the edge. He whistled softly; heavens, he must be up to twenty-five pounds! He was beautiful. It was the moon betrayed him. He was motionless in the clear water. A small head and a round body on him. Beautiful. *That's the way*, said the Sergeant. His heart was pounding. He rose to his knees. *I may as well get back.* He used the gaff to get himself to his feet.

The gaff! The Sergeant looked at the wicked winking point of it. Terrible things, terrible things, man.

He got back on his belly. He looked once. He struck. Some-

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thing jolted his arm as if he had hold of an exploding hand-grenade. The eyes were bulging out of his head. His heart was turbulent. Full of triumph, and a great fear that somehow he was going to lose the beautiful creature.

He started to pry him loose from the water. A soft voice from his right-hand side tsked, and tsked.

"What's the country comin' to?" the voice asked. "Corruption in high places. Bloody poachers in the police force. And amateur poachers, at that," went on the voice urgently, as the salmon started to play the Sergeant.

"For the love of heaven, help me, Mickey," said the Sergeant, "or he'll get away."

☆ ☆ ★

## *A WAY WITH CHILDREN*

**There are those who have a way with children and those who cry, "Away with them!" The following characters fall into one or other group. Allow yourself one point for identifying the character, one for the work in which he appears and one for the author, making a possible total of twenty-four.**
**The answers are on page 72.**

1. *A royal uncle whose attitude was simply suffocating.*
2. *He meant well, with his* Diddle, diddle, diddle, diddle, *and his knee that he worked up and down as if turning a knife-grinder's wheel with his foot, but the last of the Neros didn't like it at all.*
3. *A one-eyed Yorkshireman, he believed in teaching his boys to conquer their passions and not to be eager after vittles.*
4. *Remarking that children should be seen, not heard, he consigned his offspring to a watery grave.*
5. *They promised unearthly pleasures if the child would come, hand in hand, to the waters and the wild.*
6. *He would toss them up to the ceiling in a very frightful way, and there was nothing they liked so much.*
7. *She believed in pepper, rough words, and beating.*
8. *A changeable mother—she would comb their hair on a red-gold throne, but in the end she deserted them all.*

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★ *New Zealand authors have made a vital and distinctive contribution to the short story since Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" appeared in the 'twenties. As a tribute to the variety and quality of their writing, Argosy selects this masterly story by one of the Dominion's leading writers.*

# AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

## by JAMES COURAGE

THE earthquake happened late on a Saturday night in summer and shook all that coast by the sea and the coastal farms and townships for twenty miles inland, as far as the mountains. At the Blakiston homestead everyone had gone to bed and was asleep, but the shake woke Mr. Blakiston immediately. When it was over he sat up in bed, lit his candle, and looked about him at the bedroom walls and ceiling. Nothing seemed to be cracked or damaged, though the quake had been a sharp one and had heaved the house up for a moment or two and worried it as a dog worries a rabbit's pelt he cannot swallow.

"Are you all right?" Mr. Blakiston asked his wife, who was now awake beside him in the double bed.

"Yes, dear, but you'd better find out if Walter's awake. The quake may have scared him." She had been a good deal scared herself, waking from a dream of ships on the sea.

Her husband leaned up on one elbow, staring at the yellow candle-flame and listening so as to hear any sound from his son's room along the passage. Walter was six and had a room to himself near the head of the stairs.

"He'd call out if he'd been frightened," said Mr. Blakiston, hearing no sound in the house. He blew out the candle and lay back beside his wife. "A nasty little quake, all the same," he added. "A hell of a nasty little quake." Presently he was asleep again, lying on his back, snoring softly.

In the morning nothing was found damaged about the homestead, except for the old wash-house chimney, out at the back, which had collapsed on to the roof. Indoors, however, in Mr. Blakiston's smoking-room, a thin china vase in which he kept hen-feathers for cleaning his pipe had fallen from the edge of the mantelpiece and shattered itself on the brick hearth. At breakfast-time he brought the pieces of the vase to the table, in his hand, to show his wife and son.

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" English china," he explained to the boy, pointing to a delicate capital D on what had been the base of the vase. " You don't get fine stuff like that made in this corner of the world. D stands for Doulton, the people who fired it."

But Walter was less interested by the vase than by the news of the earthquake which had not wakened him in the night. " Did the whole house rock? " he asked his father.

" Rocked a bit, yes, and rose a bit."

" Will the quake have shaken down any houses we know? "

" Not many, I should think. A few ceilings and chimneys down, maybe."

Walter ate his porridge. " I'd like to see an earthquake shake down a lot of houses," he said presently, " then all the people in them'd get a good fright."

" Walter," said his mother, who sat with her back to the windows, at the end of the table, " you oughtn't to say things like that, without thinking first. It's very selfish."

" I did think first," said Walter softly, to his plate.

" What did you say? " asked his mother. " You know I've told you not to mumble."

" I only said I wished I'd wakened up in the earthquake," he said loudly.

That day was a Sunday. Mr. Blakiston was a farmer and though there are jobs to be done on a farm all seven days of the week he usually spent Sundays near the homestead and in the home stables and paddocks, resting himself. On one Sunday out of every four the family went to church in the township below the hills of the farm. Today, however, Mr. Blakiston, willingly helped by Walter, put on an old dungaree suit and set to to clear the bricks from the roof of the wash-house, where the chimney had fallen in the night.

Walter always had questions to ask when he worked with his father. " Do earthquakes happen in England? " he demanded.

" Yes," said Mr. Blakiston shortly, " but not often." He was a practical man, enjoying the manual work, and slightly bored by the way his son always wanted to talk. The breaking of the vase that held his pipe-cleaners, the vase of English china, had taken his thoughts back to the Old Country and he would have preferred to think about it in silence.

He had farmed in New Zealand for nearly twenty years but he still thought of England as home, his father's country, the original pattern. Colonial life was freer, less stiff, he liked it better, nevertheless something of the subtle flavour of the English way of living on which it had originally been founded was vanishing fast. The new climate was changing it, adapting its laws and

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forms to a younger society. And he himself had changed, and was changing, with it.

Now, as he worked at heaving bricks from the wash-house roof to the ground, he realized that he would never go back to England, as he had once intended to. He was a colonial farmer for life. He was as pleased as though he himself, and not the years, had made the decision.

"Can I drive to the township with Mum in the morning?" asked Walter, beside him on the roof.

"Yes, if you want to. Ask her yourself. Now get down that ladder and pile those bricks by the wall, shipshape."

The following morning at eleven o'clock Mrs. Blakiston had the horse and gig brought round to the front door by the odd-jobs man who was also the cowman and gardener at the homestead. Every fine week-day at eleven, wearing a flat grey hat with a veil tied under her chin, she drove to the township, four miles away, to collect the mail and the newspaper and to shop at the store. Summer or winter, she wore long elegant leather gloves to hold the reins.

On this Monday morning Walter went with her, happily hopping down from the gig to open the gates on the road as they came to them. On either side of the road lay wide flat paddocks of tussock-grass, divided by wire fences and burnt yellow by the sun. In the distance, in the summer haze, a mirage of heat flickered along the ridges of the hills. The blue reflection of the sea was on the sky.

When they reached the township, Mrs. Blakiston drove the gig along the straggling street of one- and two-storeyed buildings and pulled up before the verandah of Lakin's General Store.

"Can I go in?" asked Walter, preparing to jump down.

"Mr. Lakin will be out in a moment," said his mother. She opened her purse and found the list of groceries she wanted. "We'll wait till he comes."

Presently the storekeeper, wearing a white apron, came out from the shop door under the verandah. He shaded his eyes against the morning glare and looked up at the gig. "Glad to see you're all right after the quake, Mrs. Blakiston," he said in a high tinny voice.

"I'm very well, Mr. Lakin, but it did frighten us a little, so late at night. Did you have any damage?"

"I slept through it, myself. A few broken bottles on the floor of the shop yesterday morning, though."

Mrs. Blakiston handed over her list. "Have you heard about old Mrs. Duncaster?" asked the storekeeper.

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"Heard about her?" Mrs. Blakiston was uncertain.

"The quake brought the plaster of the ceiling down on her. She died of shock, they say, early yesterday."

"Oh, but what a dreadful thing, Mr. Lakin—" said Mrs. Blakiston. Walter saw her face tighten and her lips twitch in the sunlight. "I'd no idea—"

"Well, it was a sudden end," said the storekeeper, looking vaguely up the street. "I thought I'd better tell you," he added. "I don't like my old customers dying."

"Yes," said Mrs. Blakiston. "Thank you, Mr. Lakin. I hadn't heard about it, of course. I'll go and call on Miss Duncaster this morning."

The storekeeper nodded and disappeared into the shop, Mrs. Blakiston's list in his hand.

"The Mrs. Duncaster who's dead," said Walter, "is she the one I know?"

"Yes," said his mother. "I'd no notion," she added quietly. "Yesterday being Sunday, of course, we didn't hear."

"Did the roof fall right on her face in bed?"

"I don't know, Walter. Don't ask silly questions. You heard what Mr. Lakin said."

"If she'd been properly under the blankets the plaster wouldn't have hit her."

"She was very old. It's very sad that she's dead," said Mrs. Blakiston. She tilted his sun-hat down over his eyes and made him sit up straight on the hot leather seat of the gig.

"Are we going to visit Miss Duncaster?" he asked, after a moment.

"Yes, we must go and see her. She was very fond of her mother."

After Mr. Lakin had put a tin of biscuits, a bottle of methylated spirits and some smaller parcels into the back of the gig, under the seat, Mrs. Blakiston drove up the street to the post office and collected the mail and the newspaper. She then drove straight to the northern end of the township, where the Duncasters lived in one of the oldest homes in the district.

Made of cob and with a wooden roof, the small squat cottage was hidden by pine and eucalyptus trees from the road. Inside the fringe of trees a lawn of wild hay-like grass, burnt almost red by the sun, bordered the short curving driveway that led up to the verandah.

"Somebody else is here too," said Walter. He pointed to a saddled horse hitched by the bridle-reins to a hook in one of the verandah posts. The horse was a bay, roughly groomed and shaggy, a farmer's hack.

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Mrs. Blakiston looked at the horse for a moment as she drove up, then, carefully holding her long skirt, got down from the gig, and knocked at the door of the cottage. She knocked twice, in the hot summer silence, before the door was opened by a tall woman wearing a dark grey dress with a white lace collar.

Walter watched his mother greet Miss Duncaster and kiss her on the cheek. He had hoped that Miss Duncaster might have tears in her eyes for a mother killed in an earthquake: he was disappointed that the light blue eyes and the long pink cheeks of Annie Duncaster looked as ordinary as ever.

"You must come in and have tea," said Miss Duncaster's deep voice to his mother. "And Walter with you. Please, please do. I'd like it."

"But you have a visitor already," hesitated Mrs. Blakiston.

Miss Duncaster threw a quick glance at the saddled horse swishing its tail before the verandah. "Nobody's here," she said. "Nobody at all. Do please come in."

So Mrs. Blakiston took the gig into the shade of the eucalyptus trees, tied up the horse, and took Walter with her into the cottage. "You must be quiet," she whispered to the boy in the doorway, "and not ask questions."

The inside of the cottage was dark and smelt cool after the hot morning. The tiny sitting-room behind the verandah was made even smaller by the glass cases of china and the shelves of books against the walls. A large, creamy-white ostrich egg hung by a string in a corner, by far the most interesting thing, to Walter, in the whole room. When Miss Duncaster had brought in the tea, he sat himself down so that he could gaze at this amazing egg while his mother talked.

"I've only just heard about your mother, Annie," said Mrs. Blakiston. "I'm so very sorry."

"Mother hated earthquakes," Miss Duncaster said evenly. "We had a bad one here, you know, just after father and she had first come from England. She'd always been frightened of them since then."

"They frighten me too. Did your mother die quite suddenly?"

"A little of the ceiling fell, you know, in her room. I got her out of bed and into a chair and ran downstairs to make her a cup of tea. When I got back she was dead." Miss Duncaster put down her cup and gazed out of the window. "It was all a great shock. The earthquake itself and then my mother dead."

"I slept all through the earthquake," put in Walter, "didn't I, Mum?" Mrs. Blakiston ran her fingers over the gloves in her lap. "Yes, dear, luckily," she said.

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Miss Duncaster, who had begun to sniffle, suddenly cheered up and said, "Of course, my mother was no longer a young woman. Still, even at sixty, one likes to live. And she had had a wonderful life, you know. Young people like me can't hope for nearly so much."

"Yes, Annie, I know," said Mrs. Blakiston, who knew also that old Mrs. Duncaster had been seventy if she'd been a day and that her daughter was thirty-five. "It is hard for you, being left alone," she added.

Miss Duncaster got up, fumbling in her belt for her handkerchief. "Oh, thank you, thank you. But I shan't let myself be lonely." She glanced quickly out of the window, then moved to the door. "I'd like you to come and see my mother now," she said. "She's lying upstairs in father's old room. She looks beautiful."

"Yes, of course I'll come up," said Mrs. Blakiston. "Walter, you stay down here for a few minutes."

"Oh, but I want Walter to see her too," said Miss Duncaster. "She always loved children, you know."

The stairs were almost as narrow as a ladder and so dark that Miss Duncaster lit a candle to usher the boy and his mother round the stair-head and along the upper passage. The air, close under the roof, was as warm as the inside of a bird's nest.

"In here," said Miss Duncaster, opening a door. She made Mrs. Blakiston and Walter go in first, while she blew out the candle.

The small bedroom was crowded with dark furniture and lit only by a window in the slope of the roof. The bed was against the wall by the door, and on the bed, covered by a sheet up to her chin, lay the dead Mrs. Duncaster. Walter was startled: the creamy-white, oval face was like the ostrich-egg downstairs, he thought, except that somebody had pinched into it a nose and mouth and drawn a grim line down each cheek. He hadn't remembered that old Mrs. Duncaster looked so severe: she had always laughed at him and given him jujubes.

On a table at the head of the bed stood a vase full of green leaves and large open milky flowers that gave out a thick smell of lemons into the room.

"Magnolias," said Mrs. Blakiston gently, her head on one side. She loved flowers. "Beautiful," she added.

"I picked them from the garden," said Miss Duncaster. "Mother planted the tree the year I was born. It has grown up with me. I felt she'd like to have the flowers beside her now."

"Yes," said Mrs. Blakiston, "yes, Annie, of course."

Walter turned aside from the bed to look at a box made of

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dark polished wood. It stood on the floor by the window, with brass handles and a lock of inlaid steel.

"That was father's instrument case," explained Miss Duncaster, beside him. "He was a doctor, you know—the first doctor the district had. All his scalpels and things are in that box."

"Did he come from England?" asked Walter.

"A long time ago, in a sailing-ship, with my mother. Mother was homesick all her life for England, but she didn't go back, even when father died."

At that moment Walter saw that one of old Mrs. Duncaster's hands was showing under the edge of the sheet on the bed and that the hand held a book with an animal of some sort printed in gold on the black cover. "What's that?" he asked, pointing.

"My mother's Bible," said Miss Duncaster.

"No, I meant the—"

"Oh, the crest on the cover? That's a griffin, my mother's family crest. She was proud of that." Miss Duncaster sighed, and added, to Walter's mother: "I never knew any of the English family, of course. They meant nothing to me. I'm a colonial." She pulled the sheet over the dead hand and straightened the magnolias in their vase by the bed. "The funeral is the day after tomorrow," she finished in a firm voice.

Presently they went downstairs. Mrs. Blakiston said that she and Walter must be going home.

"You have been so kind," said Miss Duncaster, smoothing her fair, fluffy hair. She seemed to be looking round the sitting-room for something to give them as a reward. "Wait now and I'll cut you some magnolias from the garden, before you go. Yes, let me."

The huge magnolia tree, with dark leaves shining in the sun and with white flowers high up like sea-birds in the branches, grew at the back of the house. While Mrs. Blakiston and Walter stood and watched, Miss Duncaster made big agile leaps to get at the flowering branches. She dragged them down and broke off the creamy heads, careful not to bruise the petals.

"They go brown so easily," she explained. She laughed, with flushed and untidy face, handing over the bouquet to Walter. "He's amazed I can jump so high," she said to Mrs. Blakiston, laughing again, this time at the boy's face.

"I only jump like that when I'm jumping for joy," said Walter. "Don't I, Mum? I can jump a hell of a height."

"What did I hear you say, Walter?"

He had picked up the bad expression from his father. "I

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can jump as high as my belt," he amended softly, swinging the bunch of magnolias in his hand.

They walked round to the front of the house. While Mrs. Blakiston went into the shade of the trees to fetch the gig, Walter was left with Miss Duncaster. He looked round and saw that the riding horse that had been tied to the verandah post was no longer there.

"Where's the horse gone?" he asked.

"What a funny boy you are," said Miss Duncaster. "What horse?"

He pointed with the magnolias. "It was over by the verandah," he said. "We saw it."

Miss Duncaster bent down and gave him a sudden sharp slap on the arm. "You're bruising the flowers," she snapped. "There was no horse."

Mrs. Blakiston drove up with the gig. "Come along, Walter. Say good-bye nicely to Miss Duncaster."

On the way home from the township with his mother Walter said: "I didn't ask too many questions, did I?"

"No," said his mother doubtfully, "not as many as I expected."

"Then why did she slap me?"

"I don't believe she did. You invent such things."

That evening when Mr. Blakiston came in from the farm to a late tea he glanced at the big bowl of magnolias in the middle of the dining-room table.

"Not ours, are they?" he asked.

"No." His wife told him of their morning visit to the Duncasters and of Mrs. Duncaster's death in the earthquake. While she talked she fiddled on the table with the broken pieces of the vase of English china that had held her husband's pipe-cleaners and that had fallen during the night. She was sticking them together with glue. Walter, his own tea finished, watched her and listened to her talking.

"Of course it's terrible for Annie, being left alone in that old cottage," he heard her say presently to his father, "though I must say she seemed very brave about it."

"Brave?" Mr. Blakiston paused. "I should think she's damn well delighted! For ten years and more she's been cooped up at home looking after that old woman. She'll have a chance to marry now."

"I don't think she's the marrying kind."

"Don't you believe it. I hear more than you do."

"Does Joe Sleaver ride a bay horse?" Walter put in suddenly.

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Mr. Blakiston looked surprised. He took his pipe from between his lips and studied the bowl of it before answering. "Yes," he said, "now I come to think of it, he does ride a bay."

"Walter," interposed Mrs. Blakiston warningly to the boy, "you know what I said to you today, about not asking questions, don't you?"

"I only meant—" began Walter, and stopped.

"I wish," said Mr. Blakiston, "I wish I knew what the devil you were both talking about. Why shouldn't Joe Sleaver ride a bay horse if he wants to?"

"Walter thinks he saw a bay horse tied up to the Duncasters' verandah this morning," explained Mrs. Blakiston.

"I did see it," cried Walter. "Mum saw it too!"

His father and mother exchanged a glance. Then, with his pipe in his mouth, Mr. Blakiston leaned forward and lightly took up from the table a piece of the vase his wife was mending. "Well," he said offhandedly, grinning as he spoke, "well, we don't have earthquakes every night."

"I did see the horse," insisted Walter, and felt that like all older people his parents were in some sort of conspiracy against his finding things out. "I did see the horse."

"Of course you saw the damned horse," said his father suddenly. "Shut up about it, that's all." And he went on, to his wife, evenly: "I was thinking yesterday, you know, I shall probably never go back to the Old Country. It's too far away now, too long ago."

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## *FRENCH LEAVE*

The traffic in Paris is a highly confused operation, a sort of automotive poker game in which each driver tries to bluff the other. We were waiting for a gap in the traffic so we could get a shot near the Place de la Concorde, when a two-car accident occurred. The driver who was in the right went up to a traffic policeman and I heard him ask for the arrest of the fellow who'd caused the accident.

"Please!" the traffic policeman said with dignity. "I direct traffic. I do not witness accidents."

That night I got into a traffic jam myself about seven o'clock and I asked my French driver where all the traffic policemen had gone. "At this time of the evening they go home in disgust," he said. "It becomes just too confusing."

BING CROSBY, *Call Me Lucky*

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# JOURNEY'S END

**I only hope it's not improper: so many pleasant things are**

MRS. GASKELL, *Cranford*

When Jupiter wooed Juno first . . . the better to effect his suit, he turned himself into a cuckoo, and spying her one day walking alone, separated from the other goddesses, caused a tempest suddenly to arise, for fear of which she fled to shelter; Jupiter to avoid the storm likewise flew into her lap, whom Juno for pity covered in her apron. But he turned himself forthwith into his own shape, began to embrace and offer violence unto her, but she by no means would yield, till he vowed and swore to marry her . . .

ROBERT BURTON, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

## *Rendezvous*

*The children run with joy*
*Through the blue-grey evening street—*
*It is with something of their joy*
*My love and I meet.*
*—Let others gather Persian coins,*
*Their souls improve or save,*
*Here we are one lamp of bliss*
*On the right side of the grave!*

TOM BOGGS, *Twilight Corner*

## *Encounter*

A step from Rolf I halted and stood gazing at him. I looked at his mass of fair hair and at his gleaming teeth. Hot, red visions swirled into my mind, and it seemed to me that I heard worlds spinning about and coming together with a crash. My mouth felt dry, and I could not swallow. I understood at that moment that this was not a matter of our choosing each other, as other people chose each other. We simply had kept walking toward each other since the very beginning, since I was a little girl. And now we were taking the final steps!

Inside the boathouse lay our rowboat filled with brown fishing nets. Rolf and I stood beside it, very close to each other but not touching, and Rolf looked at me a long moment without speaking.

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His eyes were grave and dark. Slowly I let my clothes fall to the floor.

The boat smelt of seaweed, and pale dried little shrimps were entangled in the nets. There was the smell of tar, too. A rich heavy smell. The door banged to on a gust of wind and closed us in. It was a cold night breeze, but Rolf's bare skin burned my body. He drew kisses from my mouth. His lips were on my arms and on my shoulders, and on my breasts rising towards him. The coarse fishing-nets bit into my back, harder and harder as Rolf pressed me deep into the bottom of our boat. He put his hands beneath me, so that the nets should not tear my skin. I pressed my eyelids against Rolf's mouth, and I was no longer Anna.

EDITA MORRIS, *My Darling from the Lions*

## *Love on the Dole*

*And if I must never possess the heaven I wish for, my next desire is (and sooner the better) a clean-swept cell, a merciful keeper and your compassion when you find me there . . .*

THOMAS OTWAY, 1652–85,
*to Elizabeth Barry, the actress*

## *Point-of-Departure*

Pierre, yes Pierre, let me look again at Pierre focused in the centre of that period of wondrous gaiety, from the time when, almost shyly, we greeted each other at the rendezvous point-of-departure for the Bois de Boulogne.

" We're beginning again," he said, as he helped me into the bus that was taking us to the Bois. " I've taken a week's holiday. Some leave due. You are going to have a tourist's week in Paris. Wonderful weather guaranteed and the best possible escort."

Only the physically hardy or those in love should travel in Parisian buses, whose mechanism is surely not constructed on orthodox engineering principles which when related to public transport guarantee a certain comfort as well as some discomfort. At first we stood grasping whatever support was possible, subjected to the continual pummelling of those anxious to get off and those anxious to get on, until at last, not without a modicum of danger, we managed to slip on to the rough wood of a seat. All the time I was conscious that Pierre and I were together, that in the jolting of the bus I could put my hand on his arm knowing that this was more than a mere steadying gesture—it was a declaration of love to touch him then.

KAY DICK, *An Affair of Love*

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## *I Sought My Love*

*I sought my Love,*
*I caught my Love,*
*I bore my Love away;*
*I told my love—*
*So cold, my Love,*
*She would not stay.*

*I took my Love,*
*I shook my Love,*
*I bore her back again*
*To hold my Love*
*And scold my Love.*
*It all was vain.*

*I left my Love*
*Bereft of love,*
*And vowed my attic free.*
*But there my Love,*
*By all above,*
*Awaited me.*

WILLIAM BOX, *Forty Poems*

## *Afterthought*

Walking home tired in the Sunday dusk, it became obvious that it had been a good day . . . Pre-occupied with simple, tangible constructions, looking before and after, the Biscay of the brain was stilled to a sweet calm: and in this calm vague thoughts created themselves unconsciously—sudden, unrelated discoveries. My fingers had stopped in the middle of a knot in the bow-net, struck by an unsuspected ambiguity in the answer of the Pretty Maid.

Having all through childhood a well-founded suspicion that my parents would only tell me of anything spicy with the best intentions, I had assumed that the milkmaid, in answering the gentleman who could not marry her because her face was her fortune, that Nobody Had Asked Him, was delivering a nasty snub. Suddenly I doubted this.

*Then I can't marry you, my pretty maid.*
*Nobody asked you, sir, she said.*

Nobody asked you to *marry* me . . .

T. H. WHITE, *The Goshawk*

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# NEVER EXPLAIN, NEVER COMPLAIN

## She saw the light flash from the kukri in my hand

### by JOHN MASTERS

NO shots had been fired by either side all day, and Tulbir was an old friend of mine, so I walked slowly up the half-mile of shale and rock to his picket, and found him just below the crest.

There was no shade at all that day, no trees, no bushes, no scrub—only the short grey-green stems of sage-grass pushing up between the searing stones, and a few yellow flowers crouching in the ironbound soil.

Tulbir's men—all Gurkhas, of course, like him—were twenty or so yards away, some sleeping, some playing cards, one darning a dirty grey sock. The signaller was working the helio and flashes of light answered him from the valley floor. Tulbir's sentries were out on the crest and shoulders of the ridge. One pair lay motionless not far from us among scattered boulders. Their shirts were black with sweat and brown handkerchiefs covered their necks from the sun.

The Bren gun's shimmering barrel pointed over the hills—barren, many-coloured, silent.

Tulbir lit a cigarette, eased his back away from the stones, and shouted to his orderly: "Bring the sahib some tea." Then he turned to me anxiously: "Has the water started out yet? Our canteens are nearly empty, and we've been here for six hours. The Captain promised to send it up hours ago and we're thirsty . . . No, no, drink up your tea—we're not that badly off, but we'll be *really* thirsty when all this has gone. *Ram ram!*"

He raised the mess-tin towards his face in a gesture of acknowledgment, and ran his lips slowly round the dented steel rim.

He started to drink, looking out across the jagged panorama of hills. Under the thin brows his dark eyes were screwed up against the glare and the mongolian fold hung deep over their corners. Beads of perspiration glinted in the stubbly shaved hair under his campaign hat; his straggly moustache failed to mask the strong curve of his upper lip. His face was cross-hatched and

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wrinkled with the fine lines of twenty years in sun and snow and wind. Sharp creases in his forehead, between his eyes, pulled up the inner ends of his brows and gave him an appearance of perpetual worry.

"Jemadar-sahib," I leaned forward and spoke softly, for we were old friends, "Jemadar-sahib, why were you late back from leave this year? You knew the regiment was in this campaign . . ."

Tulbir put down the mess-tin, and a pebble rolled out from under his feet to start a little cascade between the rocks. His eyes were fixed on Vezhda, the raw red peak which towered up 8,000 feet from a distant tangle of ravines and gullies. Only a twitching muscle at the corner of his jaw showed he had heard me.

For a minute he did not speak, then: "Sahib, I told the Colonel only that my house fell down. He knows that in our hills our houses of mud and timber are always falling down. Why should I say more? It was the Colonel-sahib himself who taught me the officers' motto when I was first promoted to be Jemadar—Never explain, never complain. For twenty years I have fought for the Government all over India, and have four medals as you know. Let the Colonel think what he will . . . My house fell down."

I lay back against the rock on the place where my body had cooled it a little, and shaded my eyes with a rolled handkerchief. I said: "I don't care what the Colonel thinks. But you'd promised to be back for my wedding. All the other Gurkha officers were there. And you'd promised to spend the cold weather week-ends partridge shooting with me."

The hot light filtered through the handkerchief and warmed my lids. I could see nothing, but heard Tulbir draw in his breath. When he spoke, he started haltingly but soon the words came more freely—in trickles, and rushes, and at last in a steady stream.

Sahib, do you remember my new wife? She was old Tularam's daughter and very young. My first wife died, she was a good woman, not a bit beautiful, but good. My house was always comfortable and clean then, but there were no children. She died of pneumonia before you joined the Regiment.

It was lonely for me and I had no son.

Tularam is a queer, vicious old man—sometimes I think he is not honest and I know he is not brave—but he gave me his youngest daughter with a good dowry. She was like a bird, young and beautiful and alive. She picked flowers in the woods and sang all day in the house and danced about on the hillside to show off her pretty clothes and the jewels I gave her.

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When my turn for long furlough came, I was almost afraid to take her back to my home in Nepal. She was born and brought up here in India in the lines of the Regiment. She had some education—not much, but more than any of our hill girls. She was very young. The way to our village is long and steep, and the life there is hard. There are no shops or bazaars or cities or trains. But she wanted to go.

She cried when I said the road was rough and the life cruel. She cried and said: "You want me to stay here because you are ashamed of me, ashamed to show me to your father in your house in the hills. Besides—" she was silent a bit, then said shyly, "besides, I think I am going to have a son. He must be born in the Gurkha hills, in his father's father's house." My heart tightened for love of her.

So we set off in the train and it was very hot and uncomfortable—the hot weather began early that year. Of course I am an officer and we travelled second class, but before that she had only travelled in the third class where the ordinary natives go. So she did not know how to use the basins in the train lavatory, and she tried to sleep on the floor of the carriage instead of on the bunks.

There was a Eurasian railwayman and his wife—or paramour, for all I know—in the compartment with us from Amritsar to Delhi, and they were looking down their noses and laughing like the crossbred boors they are to see how shy and awkward she was, and the way she didn't know how to sit on the chairs but squatted on them with her feet on the seat.

She noticed though, and kept her face hidden from them behind her sari all that way.

On the road to the hills after the train had finished, it was well. The rivers were low, the air was cool, and only the coolies grumbled as they ran along with my one trunk and her three. She had brought three big tin boxes.

Of what use is it to argue and protest to a woman that the road is steep and the coolies will ask more money to carry such big boxes?

She turned on me like a spitfire and held out her arms. "Do you want me to put on these old clothes every day? I have nothing to wear. You want to disgrace me in front of your father, so that he will say, 'What a mistake my son has made in marrying this bedraggled little sparrow from the Regiment's lines!' Besides, where can I leave our savings, my jewels and ornaments?"

So the coolies sweated and grumbled up with us, but the earth was looking good and we met friends. For the first four days

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after the railway we travelled together with Rambir, and Deobahadur, and Jitbahadur, and oh, many others. Then the roads parted and on the eleventh day she and I came to my little village of Chisapani.

My father was waiting for us and blessed us, and she was very quiet and demure, and bowed low to kiss his feet. My father is old—old and nearly blind, and he can't work any more. He sits in the yard looking out at the snows of Dhaulagiri, facing the afternoon sun, chewing tobacco when he can get it and talking of the good old days under the last Maharajah . . . when he can find anyone to listen to him.

I had to work hard then. The land had not been ploughed for the spring sowing. A boundary wall had fallen down. There was a lawsuit about our title to the lower field. The Mukhia's house is many miles away, and often I had to go there and spend days sitting in the dust and arguing for the land my fathers and my forefathers have held since the Gurkhas first came to that valley.

She made the house pretty with flowers and always wore gay clothes, but she did not do much other work—canaries cannot dig, sahib—and behind the flowers there was dirt, and my father grumbled that my new wife was poisoning him with her heavy careless cooking. And she said it was a mistake about her going to have a son.

For three months it went on like that. I was working all day, sometimes at home and sometimes away from home for days on end about the lawsuit. The rains were close, and the roof of our house needed timber, so one day I went to the forests above to cut timber to mend the roof.

On the way up, in a little clearing quite close to the house, I met a young man of the village whom I know well, and when he saw me he offered to come and help.

So we went on up, the young man and I, to the hanging forests of Tehranath—three, four miles above my house. It was a hot day, but I am an old man—nearly forty now—and shrivelled by India's sun in the service of the Government. It was nothing to me, and the young man was a good worker, too, strong and lithe of body.

We cut small boughs with our kukris, hacked away the branches smoothed them and pointed them, and put them in a pile ready to pull down the hill behind us. Then we wanted some bigger trees, because two of the beams in my roof were rotten. We found one good tree easily and soon had it down, but there was no other near by on the hillside. They were too big, or too small, or knotted, or had been struck and split by lightning. The

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young man went off to the east along the hillside and I went to the west, to look for a good tree.

There was a steep curved cliff below us there, with a little path running along the top. The grass was long and brown, covering the boulders and twisted roots of trees. Up the slope there were many trees and a few caves and small holes in the rocks. I went a hundred yards along my side but could see no good tree, and I stopped to look over at Dhaulagiri. We are both hillmen, sahib, but I think in your Scotland there are only very small hills. The pictures show them purple and brown and pretty, like a strange room. But our hills are the home of the gods, the palace of the lords of creation, and they are to be worshipped. So I rested awhile from searching for a tree, and looked at Dhaulagiri. On that mountain the snow goes up to heaven, and the ridges of ice, ten miles long, shimmer blue and white.

Then I turned round and came back along the cliff path to meet the young man, calling out to ask if he had found a tree. I had my kukri in my hand but my thoughts were far away—on Dhaulagiri, on the lawsuit, on her—which is foolishness even in our hills, and more so here.

(I knew without looking up that while he spoke his eyes were searching the mountains round us for hidden enemy. The Frontier never relaxes. His voice went on, suddenly sharp.)

A painted leopard stepped out on the path in front of me. He was not a very big one, and he was not angry—but he was a little frightened.

He had heard our voices calling while he was asleep somewhere in the rocks and now he wanted to get away from that place. He lifted his lip slowly over his yellow teeth, and crouched down facing me. He made a low snarling whine and moved his head from side to side.

Sahib, then I did a very foolish thing. I thought he was going to attack me, though he was only looking for some place to get away and there was the cliff on one side and the young man's voice coming down to the path on the other. My liver turned to water when I thought of that hellish face jumping at me, his body throwing me down, his claws and teeth in my head, his legs jerking and ripping my stomach. You have seen a cat playing with a ball of wool? He was a big cat and I thought he was angry.

I rushed at him and hit him as hard as I could over the eye with my kukri.

It was a good kukri, sharp and heavy, but I do not think I did more than cut the skin behind the eye and bruise a patch of skull.

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He coughed and grunted, partly from hurt and partly from astonishment. Then, he whipped around and ran back along the path, his tail straight out behind him.

I stood dazed, trembling, and the kukri fell out of my hand to clatter on the rocks. I sat down and tried to find tobacco and flint. My hands shook.

It is not good to look at death so close, and to live. Death can only be faced when there is no escape. And then . . . and then . . . oh God, sahib, what had I done? I heard a hacking roar and a shriek.

The leopard was cornered on the path between me and the young man. I got up, snatched the kukri, and ran stumblingly as fast as I could.

Twenty yards away the young man leaned against a tree, his shirt in ribbons and the blood pouring from his back. He was poking one of our long cut sticks at the leopard with his left hand. His kukri lay in the grass by the leopard's feet.

Sahib, the leopard was very angry. It whined and snarled and bit the end of the stick. In a second it would brush the stick aside and spring again on the young man. What could I do?

For the honour of my name and family I could not stand there and let the young man die. What would *she* have said? How would she have looked at me for the rest of my life?

So, to gain courage, I muttered the old Gurkha proverb: *Kaphar hunnu bhanda marnu ramro*—It is better to die than be a coward—and sprang at the leopard screaming insults at him and at his forefathers and female relatives. For a second he held the silly stick between his claws while he turned his head to look at me. Then he flung round on his strong hind legs, and rose up to kill me.

He had moved too late. I struck with my whole weight and the speed of my run at the middle of his spine—all I could reach. I felt the steel bite through the bones of his spine. The handle was pulled from my hand as the blade jammed between two of his vertebrae and his body came round. A blast of his stinking breath hit me in the face and a thunderbolt seared my thigh from hip to knee.

I do not know what happened next. I fell over backwards, I think, and was lying on my back searching with my hands for something I could fight with. The leopard's quarters and back legs trailed on the ground, and my kukri was still buried in his spine.

He dragged himself around in circles over the jagged rocks and among the leaves and pine needles and little thorns. He

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snarled madly and whined all the time, and strained his head and neck round to snap at his own body. The curve of muscles on his chest and the upper part of his forearms stood out under the rosettes.

Then the young man picked up his kukri and slashed at the neck where the hide was stretched. The steel cut deep and the leopard died.

I unbandaged my eyes and sat up towards the end of Tulbir's story. He was leaning forward as he spoke, his arms clasped round his raised knees. The sweat gleamed on the wrinkled brown skin of his wrists. Now he abruptly shook his small square head and got up.

Without looking at me, he called to the group of soldiers: "Has anyone seen the water coming up? Signaller, send another message asking them to hurry up. And Paharsing, take your machine-guns down to the little spur there above the track to cover the water party when they come. You know the place I mean, beyond the two red rocks?"

The machine-gun squad dropped their cards and their socks, and the low chatter stopped. The machine-gunners moved a hundred yards or so down the hillside, staggering under the heavy guns and tripods.

Then they jerked the guns into position and we could see the tops of their wide-brimmed hats between the red rocks at the head of the hidden valley.

Tulbir sat down, and the long white welts on his outer thigh showed clearly. They started just above his knee and disappeared up under his shorts.

I said: "Go on, Tulbir. The wounds are healed."

"Not all of them, sahib . . ."

The young man and I lay there with the dead leopard between us for more than a minute, our faces to each other, looking in each other's eyes.

Then he turned away and started to sob, saying, "Father, you have saved my life. What have I done, what have I done?" His mind was partly unhinged, I thought, by seeing the leopard start out under his feet.

My leg hurt badly, but I got up and bandaged his wounds. They were not severe, for the leopard had struck at his back as he turned to run. There were just three deep claw-marks from his shoulders to his buttocks. He was very lucky. I tied the ruins of his shirt round him, and stripped off my own to tie the cuts on my leg, which were bleeding a great deal then.

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Supporting each other, we hobbled and fell down the mountain to my home. It took us nearly four hours. We had come up in less than one hour.

In the end it was dark and a quarter-moon was rising over the forests in the eastern valleys when we saw the lights from my windows. I called out to her to help. She came running with the servant, a raised lamp in her hand.

The wick flickered in the night wind and when she saw the young man and me, and the dark patches where our clothes stuck to us, and the wet blood dripping on the ground as we walked, she cried out " My lord, my lord, what have you done? " and flung herself on the ground, clawing the paving-stones in our courtyard.

The servant girl howled like a jackal with terror. Then my father came out calling blindly for his son, and he was more trouble than we two wounded were.

In the end I got well. They tied me up in plasters of cow-dung and herbs. I drank much hot milk. By the grace of the gods the wounds healed clean. The rains came, and the lawsuit dragged on and on. The lying swine who were trying to steal my land bought perjured witnesses to swear that in the year of the great earthquake—forty and more years ago—such and such had been done, that my grandfather forged our papers, and stole the land of a poor widow killed in the storms of that year.

Phew! The whole business stank! To fight for my land I spent days down there in Tatagarhi, staying with my mother's brother who is a poor man living near the town. No one can foretell how long a journey will take in our hills during the rains. The paths are washed away down the hillsides, the mist boils up from the deep valleys.

It is dangerous to take short cuts across the mountain when one cannot see. The stones and grass are slippery and a man who makes a mis-step may slide down six thousand feet to be shattered on the rocks in the river-beds.

The rivers fill up with water, and from being two feet deep —cool under the trees and full of fish—they become angry torrents, ten, twenty, thirty feet of grey water. They roll huge stones like the sides of houses in their beds, and sweep away grazing cattle and playing children and old men asleep on their porches. Then we have to sit down on the bank and wait for the spate to subside, which may take two days. Or we have to build new bamboo bridges and swing ourselves over somehow.

One day I was bidden to Tatagarhi for another week of hearings. When I reached there that same evening my uncle

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told me that the suit had been postponed because one of those swines' lying friends had not turned up. I stayed the night and went back the next day to my home.

There was no rain—for nearly three days the sky had been clear—and the air was full of small birds singing and butterflies wheeling and turning about in the sun. The sky seemed new and you could see from the high hillsides a hundred miles out over the jungles of the *terai* and across the plains of India.

I came down over the ridge among the trees, past the place of the leopard and down towards the back of my house. I came to the clearing where I had met the young man that day.

Sahib, *she* was there—lying on her back in a patch of shade. The young man of the leopard was standing beside her, and as I watched she raised her arms slowly and stroked the back of his knees.

He looked down without speaking. Her eyes were on his face and she said, in the liquid voice of a woman who loves: "My darling, my darling, my darling," over and over again.

It was a shameless thing, there in the scattered sunlight of the pine forest . . . But it was beautiful. Now I can say it, it was beautiful to see the young pair, in the woods and in love. The young man knelt down beside her and held her hands. Then I saw his face was not the face of a happy lover. There was a knotted cord round my temples and my breath choked me, but the young man was in a worse hell.

The curve of his body and the hang of his head showed the pain that was tearing him in two.

He spoke: "For months now this has been going on—ever since the first week you came. When he saved my life, I could not bear to look at him. Your touch is like salt in the wounds the leopard gave me . . ." He went on, very gently, "What of the child?"

She laughed with all her teeth white between her lips, and picked a red flower to put in his hand: "Oh, I'll tell him he is going to have a son after all."

She stood up, and fixed her eyes on him. It was an ugly, hungry look, and very plain. She never looked at me like that. She cried, "My dearest one, our time is short."

Then I stepped out into the clearing with my kukri in my hand. She turned, and I watched her bare pointed breasts heave more slowly, more slowly. Slowly her hands pulled the bodice together over them.

I watched her eyes. They had been blind, lost. They saw the light flash from the kukri in my hand.

It took many seconds for her to understand. Her shoulders

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came forward and at last she stood facing me, realizing me. She started to scream, steady screams, like the beat of a dance—the way a woman or a child screams when they're really terrified. The young man only bowed his head and waited. My eyes were blinded with red tears, my liver swelled in me, I do not know whether I felt anger or despair. I had to stop that unbearable screaming.

I stepped up to her and swung the kukri down hard into her face. The edge bit through her nose and cheek-bones and the screaming choked off. She fell forward on the turf among the pine needles.

The young man waited with his hands by his sides and never moved or spoke. He groaned when she fell at his feet, and when her blood ran out between his toes I saw the muscles of his hand clench and unclench.

His head was silhouetted against the ice cliffs of Dhaulagiri, so far away, and all at once I felt empty.

Waves of nausea came over me. I loved her! I loved her! As the young man waited I drew the blade of the reeking kukri gently over the back of his neck and my voice was thick. I said, "Her blood is on your head."

He stood there still, and when I picked her up and carried her down to my house he had not moved.

For weeks she lay on the bed inside a dark room, moaning and crying out as the rains circled and came back over us. The water drummed on the roof and streamed down the windows. The lightning bolts flashed and rippled across the face of Dhaulagiri, and shattered the tall trees and split the rocks, and the thunder exploded all round our little house.

For nine weeks I seldom went out of that room, and when I was there her eyes never left my face. At first they used to grow small with terror when I went to bathe her wounds. She'd give a cry and twist her mouth. What was left of it. Later she watched me, unwinking, night and day. I don't know when either of us slept. One week she was delirious, calling out again and again the young man's name. Not mine. She never called for me. In the end she recovered. Her face healed, though she will never be beautiful. There are great scars across it, and her little snub nose is scarred—broken. She only has two or three teeth in her upper gums.

My leave was up already, but I waited for the child to be born and it was a boy, as she had said. My father held a big celebration at my home and all our relations came to congratulate me. I could not get drunk, however much *raksi* I drank.

I was months late when I started back, and as I left the house

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she stood in the doorway, holding the boy to her, looking at me with her beautiful eyes out of that face. The face is not beautiful, as I told you. She didn't speak then, but hated me without words.

She hated me for spoiling the shape of her lips—not because I'd tried to kill her. She hated me because the young man hated himself and had left the village.

He rose to his feet and hitched up his equipment. His face was fixed in its habitual grim lines. He said, after that long pause: "She used to call the little child 'your son,' mockingly, to my face, when we were alone, and stroke its cheeks and exclaim how like me it looked."

He flicked away his cigarette and walked round the crest of the hill. When he had disappeared among the rocks I sat still for a minute, thinking. Then I climbed awkwardly to my feet and looked down into the valley. It was no good worrying.

At last the water was coming up. Through glasses I could see the party—two mules and six men—picking its way up the stony trail towards us.

They were several hundred yards off, and coming slowly, so I went over to the riflemen, who were still playing cards, and gave them back the mess-tin they had lent me for my tea. We talked a few minutes, and laughed about something that had happened the week before—I forget what.

We were talking when I heard the vicious irregular smacks in the air all around us. We threw ourselves on the stones, and they were sharp and red-hot. The signaller fell noisily over the helio, and died quickly, coughing blood onto the mirrored glass.

Tulbir ran into sight and dropped behind a rock, where I joined him. The smacking in the air went on, and we could hear the hollow *dwong* of each shot reverberating in the hills long after the smack had recorded the passing of the actual bullet. I suppose I ought to have taken command then, because I was a lieutenant, but it was Tulbir's battle and I thought he'd better run it his own way.

He was looking for the water party down the hill with his glasses, and shouting to Numbers 1 and 3 Sections to stand to their posts. He told Number 2 to stay near him among the rocks, as his reserve.

The men, on his signal, jumped up and ran like snipe to their positions and the firing grew to a sudden climax. Down the hill the machine-gunners were crouching low behind the two red rocks and we couldn't see their hats any more. Chips of stone flew up everywhere and I got a cut in my cheek.

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Tulbir put down his glasses and said: "Some of them must be working round the side of the hill to cut off the water party. The rest are pinning us here by this firing."

He called to Number 2 Section, lying ready all round us, to follow him, and we all jumped up and bounded after him from rock to rock down the hill. Our nailed boots clattered on the granite outcrops, equipment flapped and bounced, the men's rifle-slings flailed the air. I dropped down safe a few seconds later beside the machine-gunners between the red rocks.

Then I saw the water party clearly, hurrying along into shelters as fast as they could, the sweating drivers pulling at the animals' heads, while the little escort, spread out behind them, bounced over the rocks.

I saw the man at the back hit in the leg as he ran crouched towards the lee of a tiny spur. Someone should have stopped to help him but the front of the party was almost up to us and there was so much noise and excitement that the man fell unnoticed by his own group. We saw him sit up to feel at the leg doubled under him, and suddenly lie flat as bullets cracked into the stones round him.

No one had seen any enemy yet. You don't, when you're fighting Pathans—not until they rush in to get your rifle and ammunition. That's what it's all about, as a general rule. Rifles are worth a lot of money and prestige to a Pathan.

The worried cleft in Tulbir's forehead deepened. He took a long look at the configuration of the valley, and at the wounded man. He sort of smiled then, and said to the machine-gun commander: "Paharsing, I'm going down to bring him in. Aim your guns one degree right and left of him. If the Pathans rush him, open fire and keep firing. Understand?"

Paharsing gasped, "Jemadar-sahib, it's murder!" but Tulbir cut him short: "Fool! The Pathans *will* kill him, you only *may*. Now, are you quite clear? Open fire when the tribesmen get within ten yards, whoever else is there and whatever else is happening. That's an order!"

Paharsing raised his hand in acknowledgment. The machine-gunners tapped the butts of the guns with the heel of their hands until the barrels were pointing steeply down the hill—pointing at the wounded man.

Tulbir brought his knees up under him, and turned to me. "Never explain, never complain. Remember that, sahib, if—" He didn't finish but threw himself down the hill towards the wounded man, running just left of the trajectory the machine-gun bullets would follow if the guns opened fire.

Almost at once two tall figures with dirty grey-black robes

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flying in the air and long pointed knives gleaming in the late sun bounded out from lower down the side of the valley and ran across the slope.

Another flurry of bullets exploded among us. The machine-gunner nearest me said something and rolled away from the gun. His Number 2 brushed the dead hands off the twin grips and took his place.

Down the hill Tulbir turned in towards the wounded man, so that he and the two Pathans converged on the body from opposite sides. My binoculars were trembling in my hands but I could see the Pathans' faces. They were bearded and their mouths were open, lips curved snarling-smiling back. They swooped down screaming, knives out.

When they were all nearly on the wounded rifleman, Tulbir raised his arm and flung himself to the ground. The Pathans yelled in triumph and rushed on.

The machine-guns opened up together. The appalling hammering, stammering, double clatter of them was a foot from my ear. The barrels rocked and vibrated with a tripping, interlocked rhythm. The gunners pressed down with their thumbs on the double buttons, and sat up straight and looked at the target just as if it was a paper one. (Hemingway's an observant chap. Machine-gunners do have flat eyes.)

The bullets ripped the Pathans apart, and their grey rags fluttered down into the rocks and lay sprawled and still. The guns stopped. Nothing moved. We could see all four bodies down there, all still.

After a minute Tulbir's head came up a few inches and he waved his hand. All firing everywhere on the hillside had stopped, as if turned off at a tap, and several of us ran down to the huddled group below. I propped Tulbir up and asked him where he was hit. He pointed and we could see that the kneecap of his left leg was smashed. He was gasping, crying out weakly: "Sahib, it worked . . . nothing else could have, could it? Could it?"—almost desperately, over and over again—"It was fair chance . . ."

By then they'd seen down at headquarters what was happening and the screw-guns started to do an area shoot on the hill where the rest of the tribesmen were creeping and scattering away. The shells burst in a slow thunder on the sides of the valley, and the wounded rifleman, who had been lying like a dead man, sat up and groaned.

He was covered in dust and dirt and his eyes wandered slowly from his broken leg to the dead tribesmen, to us standing silent and reassuring round him, then to Tulbir.

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When he saw Tulbir the young man's pupils widened, went duller and darker, and seemed to lose all life. His hands gave way and he rolled forward on the stones, his fingers scrabbling in the dirt. Tears streamed from his eyes, and splashed the shale and glistened on the little yellow flowers.

★ ★ ★

## *THE CASTAWAY*

It was an aged castaway upon a desert strand;
The wind had blown his mast away, he drifted to the land,
And all his life had passed away upon the desert strand.

And human speech was strange to him, he had forgot it all,
And change was no more change to him; he had a cavern small
That was a moated grange to him, his harbourage and hall.

The shark he hunted jauntily, the turtle and the bird,
And songs he sang most chauntily that had not any word,
And wore bright feathers flauntily, and thought them not absurd.

There came a brave ship's crew to him, when he was ninety-four;
The words they spoke were new to him, for speech he spoke no more,
They brought a tin of stew to him, that had enough in store.

Whatever things they said to him, he had no word to say;
The outer world was dead to him, he would not sail away,
The cavern was his bed to him, sufficient was the day.

They wagged their heads most drearily, that he was so serene;
They pulled their oars most wearily, back to their brigantine.
He waved at them most cheerily, and ate a mangosteen.

R. P. LISTER

*In next month's ARGOSY—NEIL BELL—WILLIAM SANSOM—EDWARD LINDALL*

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# FROZEN BEAUTY

## I am a brave man, but this place made me afraid

### by GERALD KERSH

DO *I* believe this story?

I don't know. I heard it from a Russian doctor of medicine. He swears that there are certain facets of the case which—wildly unbelievable though it sounds—have given him many midnight hours of thought that led nowhere.

"It is impossible," he said, "in the light of scientific knowledge. But that is still a very uncertain light. We know little of life and death and the something we call the soul. Even of sleep we know nothing.

"I am tired of thinking about this mad story. It happened in the Belt of Eternal Frost.

"The Belt of Eternal Frost is in Siberia.

"It has been cold, desperately cold, since the beginning of things . . . a freak of climate.

"Did you know that a good deal of the world's ivory comes from there? Mammoth ivory—the tusks of pre-historic hairy elephants ten thousand years dead.

"Sometimes, men digging there unearth bodies of mammoths in a perfect state of preservation, fresh enough to eat after a hundred centuries in the everlasting refrigerator of the frost.

"Only recently, just before Hitler's invasion, Soviet scientists found, under the snow, a stable complete with horses—standing frozen stiff—horses of a forgotten tribe that perished there in the day of the mammoths.

"There were people there before the dawn of history; but the snow swallowed them. This much science knows. But as for what I am going to tell you—only God knows."

(I have no space to describe how the good doctor, in 1919, [illegible] lost in the Belt of Eternal Frost. Out of favour with the [illegible]sheviks, he made a crazy journey across Siberia towards [illegible]a. In a kind of sheltered valley in that hideous hell of ice, [illegible]hut.)

[illegible]ed. A man came; shaggy and wild as a bear, but a blond[illegible]ian. He let me in. The hut was full of smoke, and hung with traps and the pelts of fur animals.

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"On the stove—one sleeps on the brick stove in the Siberian winter—lay a woman, very still. I have never seen a face quite like hers. It was bronze-tinted, and comely, broad and strong. I could not define the racial type of that face. On the cheeks were things that looked like blue tattoo-marks, and there were rings in her ears.

"'Is she asleep?' I asked, and my host replied: 'Yes, for ever.' 'I am a doctor,' I said; and he answered: 'You are too late.'

"The man betrayed no emotion. Maybe he was mad, with the loneliness of the place? Soon he told me the woman's story. Absolutely simply, he dropped his brief sentences. Here is what he said:

I have lived here all my life. I think I am fifty. I do not like people around me.

About fifteen . . . no, sixteen years ago I made a long journey. I was hunting wolves, to sell their skins. I went very far, seven days' journey. Then there was a storm. I was lucky. I found a big rock, and hid behind it from the wind. I waited all night. Dawn came. I got ready to go.

Then I see something.

The wind and storm have torn up the ground in one place, and I think I see wood. I kick it. I hit it with my axe. It is wood. It breaks. There is a hole.

I make a torch with some old paper that I have, and drop it down. There is no poisonous air. The torch burns. I take my lamp, and, with a little prayer, I drop down.

There is a very long hut. It is very cold and dry. I see in the light of my lamp that there are horses. They are all standing there, frozen; one with hay or something, perhaps moss, between his teeth. On the floor is a rat, frozen stiff in the act of running. Some great cold must have hit that place all of a sudden—some strange thing, like the cold that suddenly kills elephants that are under the snow for ever.

I go on. I am a brave man. But this place makes me afraid.

Next to the stable is a room. There are five men in the room. They have been eating some meat with their hands. But th[e] cold that came stopped them; and they sit—one with his ha[nd] nearly in his mouth; another with a knife made of bronze. [It] must have been a quick, sudden cold, like the angel of [death] passing. On the floor are two dogs, also frozen.

In the next room there is nothing but a heap of [furs] floor, and sitting upon the heap of furs is a little girl, [about] years old. She was crying, ever so long ago. There [was] [no] [one] [to] [hear] [her]. [She] [was] [all] [alone]. [I] [found] [her] [when] [I] [broke] [down] [the] [door].

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round little pieces of ice on her cheeks, and in her hand a doll made of a bone and a piece of old fur. With this she was playing when the Death Cold struck.

I wanted more light. There was a burnt stone which was a place for a fire.

I look. I think that in the place where the horses are there will be fodder. True; there is a kind of brown dried moss. The air is dry in that place! But cold!

I take some of this moss to the stone, and put it there and set light to it. It burns up bright, but with a strong smell. It burns hot. The light comes right through the big hut, for there are no real walls between the rooms.

I look about me. There is nothing worth taking away. Only there is an axe made of bronze. I take that. Also a knife, made of bronze too; not well made, but I put it in my belt.

Back to the room with the furs in it, where the fire is blazing bright. I feel the furs. They are not good enough to take away. There is one fur I have never seen, a sort of grey bearskin, very coarse. The men at the table, I think, must have been once, long ago, strong men and good hunters. They are big—bigger than you or I—with shoulders like Tartar wrestlers. But they cannot move any more.

I stand there and make ready to go. There is something in this place I do not like. It is too strange for me. I know that if there are elephants under the frost, still fresh, then why not people? But elephants are only animals. People, well, people are people.

But as I am turning, ready to go, I see something that makes my heart flutter like a bird in a snare. I am looking, I do not know why, at the little girl.

There is something that makes me sorry to see her all alone there in that room, with no woman to see to her.

All the light and the heat of the fire is on her, and I think I see her open her eyes! But is it the fire that flickers? Her eyes open wider. I am afraid, and run. Then I pause. *If she is alive?* I think. *But no*, I say, *it is the heat that makes her thaw.*

All the same, I go back and look again. I am, perhaps, seeing dreams. But her face moves a little. I take her in my arms, though I am very afraid, and I climb with her out of that place. Not too soon. As I leave, I see the ground bend and fall in. The heat has loosened the ice that held it all together—that hut.

With the little girl under my coat, I go away.

No, I was not dreaming. It is true.

I do not know how. She moves. She is alive. She cries. I give her food; she eats.

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That is her, over there, master.

She was like my daughter. I taught her to talk, to sew, to cook—everything.

For thousands and thousands of years, you say, she has lain frozen under that snow—and that this is not possible. Perhaps it was a special sort of cold that came.

Who knows? One thing I know. I found her down there and took her away. For fifteen years she has been with me—no, sixteen years.

Master, I love her.

There is nothing else in the world that I love.

"That's all," the doctor said. "No doubt the man was mad. I went away an hour later. Yet I swear—her face was like no face I have ever seen, and I have travelled. Some creatures can live, in a state of suspended animation, frozen for years. No, no, no, it's quite impossible! Yet somehow, in my heart I believe it!"

★ ★ ★

*GRACE NOTE*

Have you ever felt the overpowering desire to sleep while driving a motor-car on a long journey? You close your eyes for a couple of seconds and open them to find yourself heading straight for a telegraph pole at the side of the road . . . This is exactly how you feel when you fall asleep while playing the viola at a concert. I remember the morning when we arrived at St. Pancras at 8.30 a.m., after travelling all night without a wink of sleep, and went on to Queen's Hall for a rehearsal from ten to one, followed by a Symphony Concert at three . . .

At the concert we were practically dead and judging by the "dominoes" (to the uninitiated this is an orchestral expression for a note played by accident in a silent bar) which came from all parts of the orchestra, telegraph poles must have been appearing by the dozen. Fortunately, to my knowledge, I have only been guilty of one domino—it was an unpleasant experience and made me nervous for the rest of the evening. One puny viola playing a four-note chord fortissimo, while the remainder of the orchestra was silent. I felt ashamed, and in the interval I hurried round to the maestro's room to apologize and was greeted with: "Never mind, Coates, it was a *good* one!"

As Nikisch said to his principal first violin, on chiding him over making a mistake in a solo passage: "It is not permissible for *you* to play a false note but for *me* it is different, for when *I* make a mistake I do it *with conviction*!"

ERIC COATES, *Suite in Four Movements*

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★ SCIENCE FICTION CHOICE

# NUMBER NINE

**"What's the matter with the rabbit?" smiled the barman**

**by CLEVE CARTMILL**

HIS active trouble began on that afternoon when Jackson Andrews caught rabbit Number Nine reading the textbook on optical glass.

His first thought, naturally, was that Number Nine had somehow got out of her cage and hopped up on the laboratory desk where a head of lettuce had been put down absently and forgotten. The book, propped against the desk lamp so that the rabbit could see it with one eye, could also have been a piece of absent-mindedness.

Then, as he stood in the doorway touching these possibilities with the edges of his mind, Number Nine turned a page and continued to munch on the head of lettuce.

Certain oddities then began to agitate Jackson's consciousness. The lettuce was a special variety, and he knew for a fact that the only head in the house had been in his refrigerator.

But Jackson was not one to jump to conclusions. He was young, to be sure, but his was the scientific method: careful accumulation of data over a long period of time, the meticulous classification of same, and even then the drawing only of conclusions that seemed inevitable.

He looked back at the rabbit. It continued to nibble the diminishing head of lettuce, and did not seem to display any interest in the textbook. But even as he watched, Number Nine reached out a paw and flipped another page.

Slow reader, Jackson thought inanely, and backed out of the doorway. He would check first on the lettuce. He didn't want to go into the laboratory—yet. His mind refused to examine the reasons why, perhaps because he could not possibly call them scientific reasons.

The refrigerator was closed, but one of the kitchen chairs stood suggestively close to the door. Jackson firmly put aside any contemplation of this and opened the box. The lettuce was gone.

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He closed the door and went aimlessly out the back way to the garage. He wasn't sure just what he was going to do, but he wanted to go some place where he wouldn't be alone with his own thoughts.

He started his car, and it seemed to drive itself to Cynthia's block of flats. He went up to the top floor in the lift and knocked on a door. It was answered by an elf.

That's what he thought in the first jolt of realization, but the elf became a little girl in fancy dress.

"Are you coming to my party?" she asked.

Jackson looked up at the number on the door. "Imagine that," he said to the little girl, and turned towards the stairway. He could feel her eyes on his back as he started down.

He descended two floors, knocked at the right number, and it was Cynthia who greeted him this time. She said, "Oh, nuts!" and fled. "Come in and shut the door," she called over her shoulder. He caught the sheen of metal on her dark hair as she vanished into the bathroom in a swirl of terry cloth. He entered the room and oozed into a chair, from which he gazed vacantly at a spot in space halfway between him and the nearest wall.

"Of course," she said, through the bathroom door, "you wouldn't think to phone and let me know you were coming. Not dressed, curlers, no make-up. Well, you can just sit for a while. There's fresh coffee on the stove."

Coffee, he thought with sudden desire. A cup of coffee would be good right now. Help settle his nerves. He got to his feet, went out of the flat with no thought in mind but coffee. Black. But maybe with just a touch of rum.

He summoned the lift, presently got into his car and drove home. He parked at the kerb in front, but went round to the kitchen door. Before he did anything else, he took the kitchen chair from beside the fridge and set it on the back porch. With a ball of twine from a service cupboard he tied the chair to the drain-pipe underneath one of the laundry tubs.

He put the coffee-pot on the stove and set the table with a clean cup, saucer, spoon, and his emergency bottle of rum. He waited until the pot made hot-enough noises, turned off the gas, and filled the cup with rum. He sat down and stirred the rum absently, tasted a spoonful and, finding the temperature luke-warm, drank the rest in two swallows.

He rinsed the cup, turned it upside down on the draining board, and walked into the living-room. He switched on the radio and went to the big front window. With his handkerchief he cleaned off an area of dusty glass and stared unseeingly at the front lawn.

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He didn't want to think, but slivers of thought penetrated his consciousness despite himself. Number Nine—notes on treatment—neural pathology—reaction times—he ought to get his notes, but they were In There . . .

He squared his shoulders and started towards the laboratory. The telephone rang. Cynthia.

"What are you doing at home?" she demanded.

"Huh?" he said vaguely. "Me?"

"Yes, you. I thought you were getting a cup of coffee."

"Oh. Oh, yes. I just had one, thanks. My mawn needs lowing."

There was a long silence.

"Well, good-bye," Jackson said finally, and hung up. Another cup of coffee before mowing the lawn, he thought with pleasure.

He heated the coffee and had another cupful of rum. He sipped it this time, for the temperature seemed about right. He thought, with smug self-approval, that he had turned it off just in time. A minute longer and it would have been too hot. That's what practice does for you, he thought.

He eyed the level in the bottle. Just one more cup left, he thought. If he drank it immediately, it would still be the right temperature and he wouldn't have to waste gas in heating it again.

He emptied the bottle into his cup and raised it to his lips. Number Nine trotted through the kitchen at this moment.

Jackson set the cup down and bowed. The rabbit waved a negligent paw at him and went out on the back porch. Jackson sipped at his cup and listened to rummaging sounds on the porch. He got up and went to the doorway.

"Can I help?" he asked politely.

Number Nine was standing on her hind feet, apparently trying to reach one of the objects on a window ledge.

She pointed at a small crucible which Jackson had used in some forgotten experiment and he gave it to the rabbit.

Number Nine held it in her front paws and hopped away on her hind feet. Jackson took his seat at the table and finished his drink. It occurred to him again that he should get his notes from the laboratory, but he decided against it. Number Nine was apparently busy, and Jackson, innately polite, hated to interrupt.

His telephone rang again.

After some difficulty in distinguishing between transmitter and receiver, Jackson answered.

"Dr. Andrews?" said a male voice. "This is Carroll at Trans-America Aircraft."

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"Oh, yesh. Hullo."

"You expected to have some kind of results by now, Doctor. Are you in a position to discuss the matter?"

"Definitely, yesh."

Mr. Carroll's voice grew warmer. "Good, good! I told you at our last meeting that the Board was intensely interested in your plan to speed up reaction time in our pilots and other personnel. And the Board meets tomorrow. Could you come out and bring your data this afternoon?"

"Why . . ." Jackson hesitated, and his subconscious took over.

If the treatment on Number Nine, it told him, could achieve in a rabbit the results he had been ignoring consciously, think what it could do in intelligent human beings. The current concept of genius would be relegated to moronic levels. He hadn't tested Number Nine's reaction times, but that was a minor matter. What had happened to Number Nine mentally was not only tremendous and earth-shaking, it could bring him a fortune . . .

He snapped back to the present and tried to frame a sentence without sibilants, for he was beginning to realize what had thickened his tongue. "I'll bring out my reshul . . . Uh, I'll come over right away."

"Fine, Doctor. I'll be waiting."

Jackson hung up and went out to the kitchen. He verified his suspicions by the emptiness of the bottle and fullness of the pot, and knew he needed a quick shot of B-1 and a cold shower.

He came out of the shower in comparative sobriety and considerable dismay. He fought his reluctance, which had returned twofold, to enter the laboratory, and the battle was a stalemate until the thought of great riches tipped the scales.

He dressed, combed his hair, squared his shoulders, and went to the laboratory.

Number Nine was crouched at ease on the desk, with another book propped directly in front of her this time. She looked like any tame rabbit from behind, even though a little larger than most. Still, there was something, a gleam . . .

Jackson caught his breath and strode over to the desk. Number Nine waved what looked like a greeting and continued reading. But Number Nine was reading through spectacles.

Not spectacles, exactly, but a pair of prisms which had been in a spectrograph, now fastened to frames which had been bent to conform to the contours of Number Nine's head and eye structure. Jackson remembered the frames—an old pair discarded when he bought rimless reading glasses.

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"Excuse me," Jackson said tentatively, "but can you understand what I say?"

Number Nine turned full face to Jackson, her pink eyes magnified through the prisms, and nodded gravely.

"Can you really read?" Another nod. "Did you fix up those spectacles?" Again, the affirmative inclination.

Jackson thought a moment, went to his files, and took the notes on Number Nine's treatment. He laid the carbon copy on his desk. He tucked the original in his pocket and Number Nine under one arm. "We're going places," he said. "And I mean places," he added with sudden glee.

He placed Number Nine beside him on the seat of his automobile, took keys from his pocket, and fumbled at the ignition switch for some time before he discovered he was trying to put the key in it upside down. When he turned the key, Number Nine promptly jumped over the right-hand door to the pavement and looked back at Jackson pinkly.

"Hey, come on back here!"

Number Nine backed a couple of paces and shook her head. Jackson scratched his.

"You mean you're scared to ride in a car?" She shook her head again. "Well, come on, then." Another negative. Jackson scratched his nose. "Are you scared to ride with me, then?" This brought a decided affirmative. "You think I'm not sober enough?" Agreement to this was emphatic.

Well, Jackson reflected, maybe Number Nine was right. Here was a grown man arguing in public with a rabbit wearing spectacles, and taking it calmly.

"Will you go on a bus?"

Number Nine agreed. Jackson pocketed his keys, got out and tucked Number Nine under his arm again, and began to walk to the bus stop two streets away.

He met and passed a few pedestrians, but they seemed intent on their own business and none gave the spectacled rabbit a second glance. If they only knew, Jackson thought, thinking of tomorrow's headlines and fame. For he intended to go from the aircraft company to a newspaper office. Perhaps the company would arrange a press conference.

But if the pedestrians were indifferent or unaware, the bus-driver was not. "No rabbits," he said firmly, "unless they're in a box. Or a silk hat," he added with a chuckle, giving the blonde two seats back an arch glance.

"But your sign only says no dogs," Jackson protested.

"The sign ain't drivin'," the driver said, with another backward glance.

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Jackson stood at the kerb, after the bus was gone, in low spirits which were not the result alone of the bus driver's animal discrimination. His recent debauch contributed its share, too. He was on the verge of a hang-over.

A near-by neon sign gave him ideas. The sign read *Scotty's.*

He set Number Nine on the bar, and Scotty gave him a one-sided smile. " What's the matter with the rabbit, short-sighted?"

" Reading glasses, so she can read with both eyes at once," Jackson said. " Give me a double rum, and give her a side order of lettuce and today's paper, if you have it."

Scotty filled the order with the air of a man who is never surprised.

" Will you stay here and read while I make a phone call? " Jackson asked Number Nine. A nod sent him to a wall telephone at the back. He called Cynthia.

" I've got an important appointment at Trans-America," he said. " Will you drive me? "

" Well—yes," she answered hesitantly. " But why don't you drive yourself? "

" My rabbit won't ride with me."

" Did you say . . . ? " She broke off helplessly.

" Yeah, my rabbit won't ride with me."

" Hm-m-m. I—see. Where are you? "

" Scotty's."

" I thought so," Cynthia said grimly. " I'll be right over."

He went back to the bar and found Number Nine semi-circled by a small group of patrons.

" If I didn't know better," a tall man said, " I'd say that rabbit was reading the paper."

" It sure is a good trick," admitted a truck-driver. " Oh, here comes the guy what belongs to it. I never heard of a rabbit doin' tricks. Thought they was too dumb."

" It's no trick," Jackson said, swallowing half his rum.

" Don't gimme that. He ain't really readin'."

" She," Jackson corrected. He glanced at the paper. " Show the man the word ' Russia ' in that top headline," he said.

Number Nine, munching a leaf of lettuce, put a paw on the word.

Dead silence fell, except for Scotty's washing of glasses at the far end of the bar.

" All done by signals," the tall man said in disgust.

" You try it," Jackson invited.

The tall man showed Number Nine a press card. He looked up at the ceiling and said in a bored voice, " All right, show me the paragraph which says, ' Sources close to administration

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leaders, who declined to be quoted, said the impending crisis is one which will . . .' "

Number Nine put her paw on a paragraph in the middle of the right-hand column.

" Coincidence," the tall man said, but in a shaken voice. " Let's try again. Show me the item which says, ' Vivisection Held Boon To Science.' "

Number Nine looked up at the tall man, then turned her back on him with a shudder.

" You hurt her feelings," Jackson said sharply.

" Yeah," said a red-haired man who seemed to be holding up the bar with his paunch. " Talking about that Vivian. She's jealous."

Scotty came down the bar with his lop-sided smile. " Another round, gents? "

" I'll buy," the newspaperman said. " Put it down, Scotty, till pay-day. And give the lady another lettuce."

" Did you see that rabbit read, Scotty? " the truck-driver asked.

" I've got no time for reading," Scotty said. " Except the sports pages."

" She's awful sensitive," the red-haired man said, " and any guy that'd make her feel bad ought to be ashamed."

" I'm awfully sorry," the newspaperman said. " No offence intended."

Number Nine turned around at this, and put a shy paw on the vivisection item.

" I'm forgiven! " the newspaperman crowed. " I won't do it again, old girl. Now show me the paragraph . . ."

" Dr. Andrews," said a cold voice, obviously sifted between clenched teeth.

The semi-circle parted for Cynthia. She looked at the rabbit, the rum, the men, and finally at Jackson.

" You phoned me? "

The onlookers, who had apparently heard this tone before, drifted away.

Both persuasive endearments and demonstrations by Number Nine were required to mollify Cynthia. But when she comprehended, her dark eyes sparkled and she consented to a rum collins. Number Nine thumped the paper.

" What's the matter? " Jackson asked.

Number Nine placed a paw on an item which had to do with driving.

Jackson sighed. " No drink for you, I guess." He picked up the rabbit. " Let's go," he snorted.

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"So long, Miss Rabbit," the newspaperman called.

Cynthia chattered away about a church wedding and houses in the country, with scads of money earned by Number Nine, on the way to Trans-America. She patted the rabbit occasionally. She discussed certain phrases in the marriage ceremony as she drove between fields of grain which bordered the aircraft property. She sent Jackson into the administration building with a quick but meaningful kiss.

Mr. Carroll, the grizzled personnel manager, listened attentively to Jackson's account of his experiments, examined the notes on Number Nine's treatment with alert but expressionless grey eyes, but his square face became graver and graver as the rabbit went through her paces at Jackson's request.

"It won't do, Dr. Andrews," he said at last. "My advice to you is to destroy both rabbit and notes and go fishing."

Jackson reacted with open-mouthed astonishment. Number Nine turned her back coldly on both men.

"In order to increase efficiency," Mr. Carroll explained, "we were interested in speeding the reaction times of certain classifications of personnel. Your work and research along those lines is well known, and we asked you to try to find a way of speeding up reaction to outside stimulus. But this"—he pointed to Number Nine's rigid back—"is dangerous."

"But—but," Jackson stammered, "this completion I've experimented—I mean, well, anyway—has world-wide significance."

"Precisely," Mr. Carroll replied dryly. "If the intelligence capacity of a few—only a few—pilots were raised as high above the norm as this rabbit's has been above its norm, they'd not only take over the company, they'd take over the country, too. Maybe the world."

Jackson thought it over. "Yes, I see what you mean. I'm sorry, Number Nine," he said, getting up.

Cynthia took one look at his long face as he folded his legs into the car and placed Number Nine on his lap. "Well?" she demanded. "What did he say?"

"A lot of things," Jackson replied. "I've got to think for a while. Let me work it out in my own head first. Let's go."

Cynthia U-turned and drove back between the grain fields that were beginning to turn purple with dusk. Jackson rolled down the window on his side to let in the cool breeze. Number Nine looked ahead, her ears folded.

Her ears suddenly shot up as a wild rabbit bounded across the road some fifty yards ahead, and without warning she flung herself through the open window and hit the pavement running.

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She disappeared into the grain in a few bounds on a course calculated to intercept the rabbit ahead.

"Stop!" Jackson cried, and was out of the car while the tyres were still whining, and off after Number Nine.

He coursed through the knee-high grain like a hunting dog, and wished he had one. He found Number Nine's spectacles, discarded, he suspected, for less intellectual pursuits.

He tried cajolery. "Here, Number Nine! Here, baby! I won't kill you. Come back, please, little rabbit!"

He returned in dejection to the edge of the field where Cynthia stood. She took it well.

"After all," she said, "it's just another rabbit. You can repeat the treatment on a new one."

Jackson grunted as she started the car.

"Maybe," he said, "but just maybe, she won't pass her characteristics to the next generation. But she knows the treatment."

"So what?" Cynthia said lightly. "Where to?"

"I'm hungry."

They had a sandwich and coffee at a drive-in. Jackson gloomed in silence, and Cynthia let him alone.

"Now where?" she asked, when they were on their way again.

"Let's stop at my place first. I left the radio on."

He left Cynthia at the kerb while he ran into the house. He turned off the radio, and noticed the laboratory door was open, the light on. He went to it, not daring to hope.

His pessimism was justified. Not only was the carbon copy of his notes gone, but so also was every chemical he had used in the treatment of Number Nine.

And rabbits, he thought with real fear, multiply.

★ ★ ★

## *MATURITY VALUE*

I read this in an agricultural newspaper. A retired farmer who had saved money and was anxious to settle his daughters said he would give £1,000 to the youngest, aged twenty-five, when she married, £2,000 to her elder sister, and £3,000 to the next, who was turned thirty.

A young man standing by in the market listened thoughtfully and after a pause enquired anxiously of the farmer whether he had a daughter of fifty.

LADY EMILY LUTYENS,
*A Blessed Girl*

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# PLEASURES OF THE CHASE

**O Cupid! monarch over kings,**
**Wherefore hast thou feet and wings?**

JOHN LYLY, *c.* 1554–1606

*Louder, louder chant the lay*
*Waken, lords and ladies gay!*
*Tell them youth and mirth and glee*
*Run a course as well as we;*
*Time, stern huntsman! who can baulk,*
*Stanch as hound and fleet as hawk;*
*Think of this, and rise with day,*
*Gentle lords and ladies gay!*

SIR WALTER SCOTT, 1771–1832,
*Hunting Song*

## *Early Start*

The results were all that I could have wished; for as I rounded the corner, re-loading my gun, there, stricken to a standstill in front of me, clutching a school satchel under her arm, stood a girl roughly my own age . . .

Before I fully realized what was going on, the girl had whirled with a scream and taken to her heels, the long blonde hair, streaming out like a pennant behind her, adding to the impression she gave of actual flight, and perhaps this is what people mean when they talk of fear lending wings.

I gave chase to the music of Rachmaninov, unheard except by me, firing off my pistol frantically, but my shots must have all gone wide: for the girl, still screaming and with a good start, ran on ahead and dived suddenly down a lane leading off the street, on to which the back gardens of adjoining houses abutted. I turned the corner full-tilt in pursuit, pistol at the ready; then stopped for a moment disconcerted, for what faced me was a seething mass of small girls, all carrying the same kind of satchel and wearing what I now could see was a sort of uniform. They had emerged from a gate at the end of the lane, beyond which was a board bearing the word SCHOOL . . .

Feeling a little like one raiding a harem, but without speaking, in the time-honoured Western tradition, I jerked my gun-barrel motioning those in the way to move aside. They obeyed, falling back, the broken reeds, to reveal the blondie who shot up with a piercing shriek and tried to scramble backwards

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through the gate, but those behind blocked her path; and, too intent on my implacable advance to notice anything else, I was almost within point-blank range, my pistol was already levelled (and this time I would not miss) when a voice spoke in a tone of command, from out of the air it seemed, spoiling my aim. *Put that pistol down at once*, it said, *you nasty little boy.*

J. MACLAREN-ROSS, *The Weeping and the Laughter*

## *Non-Starter*

*Itt gladdes the harte to see faire Phoebus ryse*
*Because he comforts every lyvinge thinge*
*And wee desire to knowe the starres in Skies*
*Our selves therby to wisshed portes to bringe*
*Some are content to rome farr on the Seas*
*In hope to gett the heapes off glistringe goode*
*And to recover health and happie ease*
*We yeelde our selves to suffer losse of bloode*
*To pluck the rose so pleasinge to the sighte*
*Wee do not spare to scratch amongeste the briers*
*To wynn renowne wee see the ventrous knighte*
*Hasts on his date before his youth expires*
*But why should I pursue thy pathes o love*
*That of thy fruictes no taste at all cann prove?*

SIR ARTHUR GORGES, *The Vannetyes and Toyes*

## *On the Wing*

Love in Naples is for the most part as quiet and lightning-swift as the stroke of a knife. At twilight, when swallows fly around the old walls like volleys of stones deflected at the last moment by the wind, boys and girls gaze at each other from window to window and from *basso* to *basso*. The boys' eyes are angry rather than supplicating, and as set as if they were protected by a visor. They are proud of their masculinity and wear it like a uniform on which they aspire to pin the girls as medals, and as a result of this battling spirit they may romantically risk going to prison or the hospital in their pursuit. Meanwhile, standing motionless at her window or in the doorway of the *basso*, a girl meets look with look, until later in the evening, a boy gives her an almost imperceptible sign. He strolls slowly toward some deserted small square, arcade, garden gate or flight of stone steps outlined against the hill and leans up against the wall with a cigarette dangling between his lips, waiting for her to follow . . .

GIUSEPPE MAROTTA, *Neapolitan Gold*

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## *Pastoral*

*And Pan by noon and Bacchus by night,*
*Fleeter of foot than the fleet-foot kid,*
*Follows with dancing and fills with delight*
*The Maenad and the Bassarid;*
*And soft as lips that laugh and hide*
*The laughing leaves of the trees divide,*
*And screen from seeing and leave in sight*
*The god pursuing, the maiden hid.*

*The ivy falls with the Bacchanal's hair*
*Over her eyebrows hiding her eyes;*
*The wild vine slipping down leaves bare*
*Her bright breast shortening into sighs;*
*The wild vine slips with the weight of its leaves,*
*But the berried ivy catches and cleaves*
*To the limbs that glitter, the feet that scare*
*The wolf that follows, the fawn that flies.*

A. C. SWINBURNE, 1837–1909,
*The Hounds of Spring*

## *White Lie*

Once we drove home four miles at a foot pace from Sydenham, in a black fog, with snow lying on the ground, and a man scouting ahead all the way with a candle lantern.

It was quite the most exciting evening of our lives, as the hours crept by and Mary, the family story-teller, worked off the very best of her repertory, including a ghastly tale known as "The Russian Governess."

That fabled lady eluded her horrible pursuer, by lying down in the snow in her white ball dress, while he, so easily tricked, drove the empty carriage on into the limitless steppes.

DOROTHY MCCALL, *When That I Was*

## *Consolation Prize*

*Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,*
*Though winning near the goal—yet do not grieve;*
*She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,*
*For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!*

JOHN KEATS, 1795–1821,
*Ode on a Grecian Urn*

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# THE FRUIT AT THE BOTTOM OF THE BOWL

**A million whorled webs billowed at his scream**

**by RAY BRADBURY**

WILLIAM ACTON rose to his feet. The clock on the mantel ticked midnight.

He looked at his fingers and he looked at the large room around him and he looked at the man lying on the floor. William Acton, whose fingers had stroked typewriter keys and made love and fried ham and eggs for early breakfasts, had now accomplished a murder with those same ten whorled fingers.

He had never thought of himself as a sculptor and yet, in this moment, looking down between his hands at the body upon the polished hardwood floor, he realized that by some sculptural clenching and remodelling and twisting of human clay he had taken hold of this man named Donald Huxley and changed his physiognomy, the very frame of his body.

With a twist of his fingers he had wiped away the exacting glitter of Huxley's grey eyes; replaced it with a blind dullness of eye cold in socket. The lips, always pink and sensuous, were gaped to show the equine teeth, the yellow incisors, the nicotined canines, the gold-inlaid molars. The nose, pink also, was now mottled, pale, discoloured, as were the ears. Huxley's hands, upon the floor, were open, pleading for the first time in their lives, instead of demanding.

Yes, it was an artistic conception. On the whole, the change had done Huxley a share of good. Death made him a handsomer man to deal with. You could talk to him now and he'd have to listen.

William Acton looked at his own fingers.

It was done. He could not change it back. Had anyone heard? He listened. Outside, the normal late sounds of street traffic continued. There was no banging of the house door, no shoulder wrecking the portal into kindling, no voices demanding entrance. The murder, the sculpturing of clay from warmth to coldness was done, and nobody knew.

Now what? The clock ticked midnight. His every impulse exploded him in a hysteria towards the door. Rush, get away,

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run, never come back, board a train, hail a taxi, get, go, run, walk, saunter, but get the blazes *out* of here!

His hands hovered before his eyes, floating, turning.

He twisted them in slow deliberation; they felt airy and feather-light. Why was he staring at them this way, he inquired of himself; was there something in them of immense interest that he should pause now, after a successful throttling, and examine them whorl by whorl?

They were ordinary hands. Not thick, not thin, not long, not short, not hairy, not naked, not manicured and yet not dirty, not soft and yet not calloused, not wrinkled and yet not smooth; not murdering hands at all—and yet not innocent. He seemed to find them miracles to look upon.

It was not the hands as hands he was interested in, nor the fingers as fingers. In the numb timelessness after an accomplished violence he found interest only in the *tips* of his fingers.

The clock ticked upon the mantel.

He knelt by Huxley's body, took a handkerchief from Huxley's pocket, and began methodically to swab Huxley's throat with it. He brushed and massaged the throat and wiped the face and the back of the neck with a fierce energy. Then he stood up.

He looked at the throat. He looked at the polished floor. He bent slowly and gave the floor a few dabs with the handkerchief, then he scowled and swabbed the floor; first, near the head of the corpse; secondly, near the arms. Then he polished the floor all around the body. He polished the floor one yard from the body on all sides. Then he polished the floor two yards from the body on all sides. Then he polished the floor three yards from the body in all directions. Then he—

He stopped.

There was a moment when he saw the entire house, the mirrored halls, the carved doors, the splendid furniture; and, as clearly as if it were being repeated word for word, he heard Huxley talking and himself talking just the way they had talked only an hour ago.

Finger on Huxley's doorbell. Huxley's door opening.

"Oh!" Huxley shocked. "It's *you*, Acton."

"Where's my wife, Huxley?"

"Do you think I'd tell you, really? Don't stand out there, you idiot. If you want to talk business, come in. Through that door. There. Into the library."

Acton had *touched* the library door.

"Drink?"

"I need one. I can't believe Lily is gone, that she—"

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"There's a bottle of burgundy, Acton. Mind fetching it from that cabinet?"

Yes, fetch it. *Handle* it. *Touch* it. He did.

"Some interesting first editions there, Acton. Feel this binding. *Feel* it."

"I didn't come to see books, I—"

He had *touched* the books and the library table and *touched* the burgundy bottle and the glasses.

Now, squatting on the floor beside Huxley's cold body with the polishing handkerchief in his fingers, motionless, he stared at the house, the walls, the furniture about him, his eyes widening, his mouth dropping, stunned by what he realized and what he saw. He shut his eyes, dropped his head, crushed the handkerchief between his hands, wadding it, biting his lips with his teeth, pulling in on himself.

The finger-prints were everywhere, *everywhere*!

"Mind getting the burgundy, Acton, eh? The burgundy bottle, eh? With your fingers, eh? I'm terribly tired. You understand?"

A pair of gloves.

Before he did one more thing, before he polished another area, he must have a pair of gloves, or he might unintentionally, after cleaning a surface, redistribute his identity.

He put his hands in his pockets. He walked through the house to the hall umbrella-stand, the hat-rack. Huxley's overcoat. He pulled out the overcoat pockets.

No gloves.

His hands in his pockets again, he walked upstairs, moving with a controlled swiftness, allowing himself nothing frantic, nothing wild. He had made the initial error of not wearing gloves (but, after all, he hadn't *planned* a murder, and his subconscious, which may have known of the crime before its commitment, had not even hinted he might need gloves before the night was finished), so now he had to sweat for his sin of omission. Somewhere in the house there must be at least one pair of gloves.

He would have to hurry; there was every chance that someone might visit Huxley, even at this hour. Rich friends drinking themselves in and out of the door, laughing, shouting, coming and going without so much as hullo-good-bye. He would have until six in the morning, at the outside, when Huxley's friends were to pick Huxley up for the trip to the airport and Mexico City . . .

Acton hurried about upstairs opening drawers, using the handkerchief as blotter. He untidied seventy or eighty drawers in six rooms, left them with their tongues, so to speak, hanging



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out, ran on to new ones. He felt naked, unable to do anything until he found gloves. He might scour the entire house with the handkerchief, buffing every possible surface where finger-prints might lie, then accidentally bump a wall here or there, thus sealing his own fate with one microscopic, whorling symbol!

It would be putting his stamp of approval on the murder, that's what it would be! Like those waxen seals in the old days when they rattled parchment, flourished ink, dusted with sand to dry the ink, and pressed their signet-rings in hot crimson tallow at the bottom. So it would be if he left one, mind you, *one* finger-print upon the scene! His approval of the murder did not extend as far as affixing said seal.

More drawers! Be quiet, be curious, be careful, he told himself.

At the bottom of the eighty-fifth drawer he found gloves.

"Oh, my lord!" He slumped against the bureau, sighing. He tried the gloves on, held them up, proudly flexed them, buttoned them. They were soft, grey, thick, impregnable. He could do all sorts of tricks with hands now and leave no trace. He thumbed his nose in the bedroom mirror, sucking his teeth.

"*No!*" cried Huxley.

What a wicked plan it had been.

Huxley had fallen to the floor, *purposely*! Oh, what a wickedly clever man! Down onto the hardwood floor had dropped Huxley, with Acton after him. They had rolled and tussled and clawed at the floor, printing and printing it with their frantic fingertips. Huxley had slipped away a few feet, Acton crawling after to lay hands on his neck and squeeze until the life came out like paste from a tube!

Gloved, William Acton returned to the room and knelt down upon the floor and laboriously began the task of swabbing every wildly infested inch of it. Inch by inch, inch by inch, he polished and polished until he could almost see his intent, sweating face in it. Then he came to a table and polished the leg of it, on up its solid body and along the knobs and over the top. He came to a bowl of wax fruit, burnished the filigree silver, plucked out the wax fruit and wiped them clean, leaving the fruit at the bottom unpolished.

"I'm sure I didn't touch *them*," he said.

After rubbing the table, he came to a picture-frame hung over it. "I'm certain I didn't touch *that*," he said.

He stood looking at it. He glanced at all the doors in the room. Which doors had he used tonight? He couldn't remember. Polish all of them, then. He started on the door-knobs, shone

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them all up, and then he curried the doors from head to foot, taking no chances. Then he went to all the furniture in the room and wiped the chair arms.

"That chair you're sitting in, Acton, is an old Louis XIV piece. *Feel* that material," said Huxley.

"I didn't come to talk furniture, Huxley! I came about Lily."

"Oh, come off it, you're not that serious about her. She doesn't love you, you know. She's told me she'll go with me to Mexico City tomorrow."

"You and your money and your damned furniture!"

"It's nice furniture, Acton; be a good guest and feel it."

Finger-prints can be found on fabric.

"Huxley!" William Acton stared at the body. "Did you guess I was going to kill you? Did your subconscious suspect, just as my subconscious suspected? And did your subconscious tell you to make me run about the house handling, touching, *fondling* books, dishes, doors, chairs? Were you *that* clever and *that* mean?"

He washed the chairs dryly with the clenched handkerchief. Then he remembered the body—he hadn't dry-washed *it*. He went to it and turned it now this way, now that, and burnished every surface of it. He even shined the shoes, charging nothing. While shining the shoes his face took on a little tremor of worry, and after a moment he got up and walked over to that table.

He took out and polished the wax fruit at the bottom of the bowl. "Better," he whispered, and went back to the body.

But as he crouched over the body his eyelids twitched and his jaw moved from side to side and he debated, then he got up and walked once more to the table.

He polished the picture-frame. While polishing the picture-frame he discovered—

The wall.

"That," he said, "is *silly*."

"Oh!" Huxley had cried, fending him off. He gave Acton a shove as they struggled. Acton fell, got up, *touching* the wall, and ran towards Huxley again. He strangled Huxley. Huxley died.

Acton turned steadfastly from the wall, with equilibrium and decision. The harsh words and the action faded in his mind; he hid them away. He glanced at the four walls.

"Ridiculous!" he said.

From the corners of his eyes he saw something on one wall. "I refuse to pay attention," he said to distract himself. "The next room, now! I'll be methodical. Let's see—altogether we were in the hall, the library, *this* room, and the dining-room and the kitchen."

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There was a spot on the wall behind him.

Well, *wasn't* there?

He turned angrily. "All right, all right, just to be *sure*," and he went over and couldn't find any spot. Oh, a *little* one, yes—right *there*. He dabbed it. It wasn't a finger-print, anyhow. He finished with it, and his gloved hand leaned against the wall and he looked at the wall and the way it went over to his right and over to his left and how it went down to his feet and up over his head and he said softly, "No." He looked up and down and over and across and he said quietly, "That would be too much." How many square feet? "I don't give a damn," he said. But unknown to his eyes, his gloved fingers moved in a little rubbing rhythm on the wall.

He peered at his hand and the wallpaper. He looked over his shoulder at the other room. "I must go in there and polish the essentials," he told himself, but his hand remained, as if to hold the wall, or himself, up. His face hardened.

Without a word he began to scrub the wall, up and down, back and forth, up and down, as high as he could stretch and as low as he could bend.

"Ridiculous, oh lord, ridiculous!"

But you must be certain, his thought said to him.

"Yes, one *must* be certain," he replied.

He got one wall finished, and then . . .

He came to another wall.

"What time *is* it?" He looked at the clock. An hour gone. It was five past one.

The doorbell rang.

Acton froze, staring at the door, the clock, the door, the clock.

Someone rapped loudly.

A long moment passed. Acton did not breathe. Without new air in his body he began to fail, to sway; his head roared a silence of cold waves thundering onto heavy rocks.

"Hey, in there!" cried a drunken voice. "I know you're in there, Huxley! Open up, dammit! This is Billy-boy, drunk as an owl, Huxley, old pal, drunker than *two* owls."

"Go away," whispered Acton soundlessly, crushed against the wall.

"Huxley, you're in there, I hear you *breathing*!" cried the drunken voice.

"Yes, I'm in here," whispered Acton, feeling long and sprawled and clumsy on the floor, clumsy and cold and silent. "Yes."

"Hell!" said the voice, fading away into mist. The footsteps shuffled off.

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Acton stood a long time feeling the red heart beat inside his shut eyes, within his head. When at last he opened his eyes he looked at the new fresh wall straight ahead of him and finally got courage to speak. "Silly," he said. "This wall's flawless. I won't touch it. Got to hurry. Got to hurry. Time, time. Only a few hours before those damn-fool friends blunder in!" He turned away.

From the corners of his eyes he saw the little webs. When his back was turned the little spiders came out of the woodwork and delicately spun their fragile little half-invisible webs. Not upon the wall at his left, which was already washed fresh, but upon the three walls as yet untouched. Each time he stared directly at them the spiders dropped back into the woodwork, only to spindle out as he retreated. "Those walls are all right," he insisted in a half-shout. "I won't touch them!"

He went to a writing-desk at which Huxley had been seated earlier. He opened a drawer and took out what he was looking for. A little magnifying glass Huxley sometimes used for reading. He took the magnifier and approached the wall uneasily.

Finger-prints.

"But those aren't *mine*!" He laughed unsteadily. "I didn't put them there! I'm sure I didn't! A servant, a butler, or a maid perhaps!"

The wall was full of them.

"Look at this one here," he said. "Long and tapered, a woman's, I'd bet money on it."

*Would you?*

"I would!"

*Are you certain?*

"Yes!"

*Positive?*

"Well—yes."

*Absolutely?*

"Yes, damn it, yes!"

*Wipe it out, anyway, why don't you?*

"There!"

*Out damned spot, eh, Acton?*

"And this one, over here," scoffed Acton. "That's the print of a fat man."

*Are you sure?*

"Don't start *that* again!" he snapped, and rubbed it out. He pulled off a glove and held his hand up, trembling, in the glaring light. "Look at it, you idiot! See how the whorls go? See?"

*That proves nothing!*

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"Oh, all right!" Raging, he swept the wall, up and down, back and forth, with gloved hands, sweating, grunting, swearing, bending, rising, and getting redder of face.

He took off his coat, put it on a chair. "Two o'clock," he said, finishing the wall, glaring at the clock.

He walked over to the bowl and took out the wax fruit and polished the ones at the bottom and put them back, and polished the picture-frame.

He gazed up at the chandelier. His fingers twitched at his sides.

His mouth slipped open and the tongue moved along his lips and he looked at the chandelier and looked away and looked back at the chandelier and looked at Huxley's body and then at the crystal chandelier with its long pearls of rainbow glass.

He got a chair and brought it over under the chandelier and put one foot up on it and took it down and threw the chair, violently, laughing, into a corner. Then he ran out of the room, leaving one wall as yet unwashed.

In the dining-room he came to a table.

"I want to show you my Georgian silver, Acton," Huxley had said. Oh, that casual, that *hypnotic* voice!

"I haven't time," Acton said. "I've got to see Lily—"

"Nonsense, look at this silver, this exquisite craftsmanship."

Acton paused over the table where the boxes of silver were laid out, hearing once more Huxley's voice, remembering all the touchings and gesturings.

Now Acton wiped the forks and spoons and took down all the plaques and special porcelain dishes from the wall shelf . . .

"Here's a lovely piece of china, Acton. Look!"

"It *is* lovely."

"Pick it up. Turn it over. See the fine thinness of the bowl, hand-thrown on a turn-table, thin as eggshell, incredible. And the amazing volcanic glaze? Handle it, go ahead. *I* don't mind."

*Handle it. Go ahead. Pick it up!*

Acton sobbed unevenly. He hurled the bowl against the wall. It shattered and spread, flaking wildly, upon the floor.

An instant later he was on his knees. Every piece, every shard of it, must be found. Fool, fool, fool! he cried to himself, shaking his head and shutting and opening his eyes and bending under the table. Find every piece, idiot, not one fragment of it must be left behind. Fool, fool! He gathered them. Are they all here? He looked at them on the table before him. He looked under the table again and under the chairs and the service bureau and found one more piece by matchlight and started to polish each little fragment as if it were a precious stone. He laid them all out neatly upon the shining polished table.

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"A lovely bit of china, Acton. Go ahead—*handle* it."

He took out the linen and wiped it and wiped the chairs and tables and knobs and window-panes and ledges and curtains, and wiped the floor, and found the kitchen, panting, breathing violently, and took off his vest and adjusted his gloves and wiped the glittering chromium . . .

"I want to show you my house, Acton," Huxley had said. "Come along . . ."

And he wiped all the utensils and the silver taps and the mixing-bowls, for now he had forgotten what he had touched and what he had not. Huxley and he had lingered here, in the kitchen, Huxley prideful of its array, covering his nervousness at the presence of a potential killer, perhaps wanting to be near the knives if they were needed. They had idled, touched this, that, something else—there was no remembering what or how much or how many. And he finished the kitchen and came through the hall into the room where Huxley lay.

He cried out. He had forgotten to wash the fourth wall of the room! And while he was gone the little spiders had popped from the fourth unwashed wall and swarmed over the already clean walls, dirtying them again! On the ceilings, from the chandelier, in the corners, on the floor, a million little whorled webs hung billowing at his scream! Tiny, tiny little webs, no bigger than, ironically, your—finger!

As he watched, the webs were woven over the picture-frame, the fruit bowl, the body, the floor. Prints wielded the paper-knife, pulled out drawers, touched the table-top, touched, touched, touched everything, everywhere.

He polished the floor wildly, wildly. He rolled the body over and cried on it while he washed it, and got up and walked over and polished the fruit at the bottom of the bowl. Then he put a chair under the chandelier and got up and polished each little hanging fire of it, shaking it like a crystal tambourine until it tilted bellwise in the air.

Then he leapt off the chair and gripped the door-knobs and got up on other chairs and swabbed the walls higher and higher and ran to the kitchen and got a broom and wiped the webs down from the ceiling and polished the bottom fruit of the bowl and washed the body and door-knobs and silverware and found the hall banister and followed it upstairs.

Three o'clock! Everywhere, with a fierce, mechanical intensity, clocks ticked! There were twelve rooms downstairs and eight above. He worked out the yards and yards of space and time needed. One hundred chairs, six sofas, twenty-seven tables, six radios. He yanked furniture away from walls and, sobbing,

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wiped them clean of years-old dust, and staggered and followed the banister up, up the stairs, handling, erasing, rubbing, polishing, because if he left one little print it would reproduce and make a million more—and the job would have to be done all over again and now it was four o'clock!

And his arms ached and his eyes were swollen and he moved sluggishly about, on strange legs, his head down, his arms moving, swabbing and rubbing, bedroom by bedroom, closet by closet . . .

They found him at six-thirty that morning. In the attic.

The entire house was polished to a brilliance. Vases shone like glass stars. Chairs were burnished. Bronzes, brasses, and coppers were all aglint. Floors sparkled. Banisters gleamed.

Everything glittered and shone, everything was bright!

They found him in the attic, polishing the old trunks and the old frames and the old chairs and the old carriages and toys and music-boxes and vases and cutlery and rocking-horses and dusty Civil War coins. He was half-through the attic when the police officer walked up behind him with a gun.

"Done!"

On the way out of the house Acton polished the front door-knob with his handkerchief and slammed it in triumph!

★ ★ ★

*ANSWERS to A WAY WITH CHILDREN on page 20*

1. *Richard III, in Shakespeare's play of that title.*
2. *Mr. Thorne, in "Barchester Towers," by Anthony Trollope.*
3. *Mr. Squeers, in "Nicholas Nickleby," by Charles Dickens.*
4. *Father, in "The Stern Parent," by Harry Graham.*
5. *The fairies in the poem, "The Stolen Child," by W. B. Yeats.*
6. *Mr. George Knightley, in "Emma," by Jane Austen.*
7. *The Duchess, in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," by Lewis Carroll.*
8. *Margaret, in "The Forsaken Merman," by Matthew Arnold.*

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 10. Argosy's tenth Prize Crossword Competition appears on page 144. There will be one-guinea book tokens for the first three correct solutions checked on the closing date. Entries should be completed *in ink*, and posted to: ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD (No. 10), 3, Pilgrim Street, London, E.C.4 (Comp.) to arrive by Tuesday, March 9th, the closing date.

We regret that entry must be limited to readers living in Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and Eire. There is no entry fee and the Editor's decision is final.

Names of the prize-winners in this competition and the solution will appear in the issue of Argosy on sale May 7th.

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# LOVERS' MEETING

**It was as if all the summer birds had suddenly come back**

## by GLADYS HASTY CARROLL

THE thin streak of silver along the water-line to the east touched the tops of the great breakers rolling into the cove and outlined the roof of the only building on the shore, a fisherman's shed. It did nothing yet for the rest of the world except to deepen its darkness.

The air was bitterly cold, though it was an early spring morning. An icy wind drove out of the north, biting into the pebbles on the beach until they leaped up as at the sting of a lash, fanned out helplessly, hopelessly, and fell with a chill rattle.

The girl crouched by the shed could hear no other sound than this and the roar of the breakers, though she was facing inland and had put back the shawl from her ear, straining to listen. She shivered violently inside the shawl and hugged a bundle tight against her body with both arms.

This would be Friday when it dawned.

She thought of last Friday.

Last Friday she had been at this same place, at this same hour, but without the bundle. She held more tightly to it now. It was all she had.

Last Friday at daybreak, as she shivered here like this, listening in an ecstasy of hope and terror, she had at last heard a thin rumble of wheels in the frozen ruts of the inland road and then the faint far-away squeaking of a cart.

A little later she had seen the cart creep out of the inland darkness into the cold crystal light. It had stopped before the closed door of the shed. The boy on the high seat looped his reins round the whip socket and sprang down to the ground.

From the shadows where she hid she had said in a hoarse voice: "Neil!"

He had turned quickly, startled. She saw his face, thin, dark, and young. He smiled. His teeth were as white as the inside of shells.

He exclaimed, "Why, Molly! What on earth are you doing here? You must be frozen."

She shook her head, staring at him.

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He came over and stood close to her. She could feel the warmth of him. He towered over her, though she was quite a tall girl. He smiled at her again. Perhaps he had not stopped smiling. But she could not smile back. She never had been able to.

He repeated curiously, "What are you doing here so early?"

She stood stiff inside her shawl to keep herself from trembling. She made herself speak.

She said, "I've been here two Fridays before. I thought it must be time for you to come again. I know you said you would not come in the winter. But the winter has been so long."

He said, "Yes. It's been a bad winter. Still a good deal of snow inland."

He stood beating his gloved hands together, regarding her curiously, smiling, waiting for what she would say next.

She did not know what she could say. She did not know that she was going to say it, but she heard her hoarse, unused voice: "Did you ever think of last summer, Neil, while you were t'other side of The Hill?"

Last summer. Last June when she had come along the cliffs at the cove's edge, running barefoot over the cruel rocks, bringing a flask of tea and some bread and cheese to her uncle at his boat; to her uncle who complained that now so many countrymen were getting rich enough to buy horses and go into the fishing business, a fisherman had no time to eat between selling one day's catch and going out for the next day's fishing. She had come running round the point to find that she was too late. The boats had already gone out.

There was no one by the shed except one countryman who was just closing the door of the high box at the back of his cart. A young countryman with a sturdy dapple-grey horse and a brand-new bright blue cart. She had stood still, transfixed like a wild thing, like a heron on the cliff. She would have run away but she knew the young man had already seen her.

He looked up and said, "Hullo." He smiled.

She could not move. She no longer had any impulse to move. She stood staring while he walked along the patch of pebble beach and up on to the cliff beside her. His boots clicked neatly on the rocks. There was light all over him.

He said, "Hullo. What's your name?"

"Molly."

"Hullo, Molly. What have you got there?"

"Tea. Bread and cheese."

"Where're you going with them?"

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"They're—my aunt sent them. For my uncle. But he's gone."

"Who's your uncle? One of the fishermen?"

"He's—Pat Donovan."

"Oh. I've just bought fish from him. Yes, they've gone ten minutes or so. I was worried about getting the fish loaded in right. You see, this is my first time."

He looked proud and happy, standing there with his hands in his pockets, the wind at his back and the sun in his face. He talked so easily. He smiled so easily.

Molly stood staring at him, twisting one bare foot behind the other.

He hinted, "So what are you going to do with the tea and food? Might as well get rid of them, so you won't have to carry them all the way back, hadn't we? You and I?"

Now he looked like a schoolboy, proposing mischief. She stood, grave, silent, dazzled. Suddenly she said, "Might as well."

So they sat down together and ate and drank. The tea was bitter and the bread dry, but they were both hungry. They ate rapidly, without speaking, and drank by turns from opposite sides of the flask she had brought.

Then Molly put the top on, holding it on as if it might fly off, keeping her face low over it.

She said, "Now my aunt will beat me."

He looked at her in astonishment. She could feel his look. He said, "Why will she do that?"

"Because this is gone."

"Then why in the world didn't you say—"

"She will beat me anyway. For being late. She always beats me. She hates me."

"Why does she do that?" he asked heatedly.

"Don't know. Because my father was drowned—out there—and my mother died when I was born. Because she has had to keep me and there's never enough for so many. Never enough of anything. Room or food. Or anything. Because I've got an ugly face."

"You haven't got an ugly face."

"She says I have. She says I've got an ugly look. I suppose I have. She hates me for not working harder."

"Don't you work hard?"

"Not hard enough. I can't, for her. My hands won't move. My feet drag. As if I was numb."

Her own words rang in her ears and terrified her. She had said too much. She should not have said anything. It was better never to say anything.

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She sprang up in dreadful familiar terror. She ran away as fast as she could, over the cliffs, away from the sight of him, away from the echoes of what she had said to him.

But every morning after that she had come back and every Friday he was there. Every Friday when she took the empty flask from Pat Donovan, she went over the cliffs to hide just behind them until the boats had gone out. Then she would stand up and come back a little way, so that he could see her from where he was pretending to be worried about the loading of the fish he had bought. It was all pretence now. He knew how to load a cart as well as anybody.

When he saw her he would wave and call, and come sauntering across the pebbly beach with his hands in his pockets and the sun on his face.

Neither of them could stay long. But they always stayed a little while.

She never talked much after the first time. She had nothing to say which either of them wanted to hear. Sometimes he asked her a question about herself, how she lived, what she did with her days.

But she learnt to answer, "Don't talk about me, Neil. Talk about you. Tell me about your house. And your field. And the sun rising over The Hill."

That pleased them both.

He had a house, all his own. He did not live in it. He lived with his mother and stepfather and half-brothers and sisters, as he had since his own father died when he was ten years old. But he had been twenty-one in the spring, and his father's mother's property had come to him. The money which she had saved from selling eggs and knitting gloves and scarves had come to him to buy this horse and fish-cart: his business.

He talked easily, contentedly, proudly.

He said, "It is a good business, too. Country people find fresh salt-water fish a great treat."

His grandmother's house had come to him. He did not live in it. Nobody did. But he owned it now. A low red house, a big grey barn, and the stony field and green pasture which went with them. His farm. A farm was a good thing to have, if a man had a business to go with it. A man with a farm was independent.

Molly had sat listening like one enchanted, seeing him, and seeing The Hill beyond his shoulder. The Hill which was a landmark for every ship ploughing north along the coast, the home beacon for the boats coming in across the breakers, the backdrop of all she knew, the unraised curtain on all which might

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be. Listening on Friday morning after Friday morning until summer ran into autumn, until the wind laced her ragged skirt about her thin knees and washed the icy water over her bare toes. Then he was gone and winter had shut down.

So last Friday at daybreak, in the shadow of the shed, she had asked hoarsely: "Did you ever think of last summer, Neil, while you were the other side of The Hill?"

He told her gently, "Of course I did, Molly. I——"

But she could not wait for him. The winter had been too long.

"I did, Neil. I never thought of anything else but summer and The Hill. If I could help it—Neil, will you take me over there with you? Take me to your house? Will you, Neil? I can't stand it here any longer! I'll do anything you say, if you'll take me. I can work for you. I'll scrub the floors. I'll keep them as white as ever your grandmother did. I'll cook. I'll dig the stones out of your field. I'll chop wood. I'll work hard. I promise——"

But the wind was blowing her breath away now. The water was washing the sound of her words away, as pencil-marks are erased from a slate.

She whispered, "Don't you believe me?"

He put his hands on her shoulders. He was very close. He was looking at her searchingly. His eyes were dark and bright.

He said, "I know you're unhappy, Molly. I'm afraid you're too unhappy to know what you want. Does she still beat you?"

The girl turned her face away. She said, "He beats me now. Because I am bigger than she is. But he is bigger than I am. He is very big."

The young man said, "I know." He bit his lip.

He felt as if she were under a spell, and when he was near her he came under it, too. Then he asked, "You don't think you—love me, do you, Molly?"

Love? She felt spent and dizzy. It was so bitterly cold. And now the waves were fighting back at the wind, snarling like beasts, growling like thunder. Her heart thundered, too. She could see the pulse pounding in his neck.

She tried to answer, trying so hard that her voice came out in a cry. "I don't know. Oh, I don't know. I want to get away. I want to get to the other side of The Hill. Take me, Neil. Please—please——"

But he set her gently back from him, against the side of the fish-house. There was the sound of fishermen's boots coming over the beach, crunching the cold pebbles. His eyebrows furrowed.

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He said quickly, " I've got no house fit to live in, Molly. And we couldn't live anywhere together unless we were married. Run home and get warm and think about it. I'll think about it too—"

Her hands went out. She made a sound like a moan.

" I have thought about it, Neil. I don't care where you take me or how we live. Any way you say. But don't leave me again, Neil. Take me with you. Take me today. Please—"

He said, " No, Molly, I won't take you today."

The decision in his voice frightened her. It also strengthened her. And it did something else. It made her want to lay her face against his heart.

But he was moving away. The key was turning in the door of the shed. And Molly, with her hand at her mouth, crept like a shadow out of sight.

Now it was the next Friday and she was waiting here again. This time she held a bundle into which she had put all she had, and all her hopes. The sky was brightening behind her but she had turned away from it. She did not want light on her face. She knew she would never go back again to the house which she had left. If he would not take her with him this time, she would set out alone.

At last she heard the sound for which she had been waiting. The thin rumble. The far-away squeaking. Her head went up, taut; then she swayed against the rough boards of the shed wall. She began to cry, and the wind was cruel to her wet face, but she did not feel it.

The cart came on. Now she could see the grey horse's head and the downward-turning steel rim of the near wheel. She saw the outline of the man's head, black against the dark sky, and his elbow resting on his knee as he bent forward, holding the reins.

She heard him say, " Whoa ! "

He had not driven round to the door of the building. He had stopped the horse behind it. He peered inquiringly into the shadows and spoke low.

" Molly ? "

Not as if he expected an answer.

She said, " I'm here."

He exclaimed incredulously, " No ! "

A minute later he had her shoulders between his hands. She felt as if it were only his hands which held her upright. She could not look at him.

He said, " Molly, what is this under your shawl ? "

My—my things. Clothes and things."

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He repeated lightly. " Clothes ? You're going away ? "

He did not realize what he did. He could not see her face. She did not want him to. She turned it farther away, pressing it against the rough boards. She would fall unless he held her harder. Much harder.

Suddenly he did. He said, " Molly, look at me ! "

She couldn't. His arm came hard across her shoulders. With his other hand under her chin he drew her face, resisting, towards him, and tipped it back. Still she could not look at him. But he saw.

He said huskily, " Forgive me, Molly. Did you come to go back with me ? "

Her chin pressed once against his hand. She swayed. He held her harder.

" You know you'd have to marry me ? "

Again she could not answer.

He said, " Molly, listen. I'm giving you one more chance to change your mind. If you're still here when I've loaded my fish, I'll take you. But if you decide you'd better not, go away before I'm ready. You hear me, don't you, Molly ? You understand ? "

She heard herself gasp, " Oh—Neil ! "

He stood studying her for another long minute. Then, still holding her with one arm, he led her behind the shed. There was no wind there. It was cold but very still. With his other hand he pulled from the front of the cart the rug which had covered his knees. He spread it on the ground and against the building, eased her down into the fold and wrapped it round her until no part of her remained exposed except her face. She drew out her arms and covered her face with her hands. She knew she was going to cry.

He said, " Remember what I told you, Molly. Choose now, and choose for good. It's the only way for both of us."

He got into the cart and rode round to the door.

She cried silently, weakly, for a long time. Then she heard heavy boots and stopped crying for fear that even tears might make a sort of sound.

She heard her uncle's voice, and other fishermen's voices, naming weights and prices. She heard the rustle of paper and the clink of coins.

Then she heard her uncle say, " 'Tis clearing up. Shouldn't wonder if 'twas a pretty good day, for time of year."

And Neil's voice, with a strange new ring in it, said, " Yes. It's going to be a good day. Donovan, can I have a private word with you ? "

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They moved round to the side of the shed. She could hear her uncle cutting a slice off his plug of tobacco.

Neil said, "It's about the girl who lives with you, Molly. You've been ill-treating that girl, Donovan. You and your wife have been ill-treating her for years. It's going to stop."

Pat Donovan swore. He said, "What makes you think so?—And what damned business is it of yours?"

Neil said, "Never you mind. Just remember what I told you. The girl's old enough. She doesn't have to put up with it, and she's not going to. She's got friends, whether you know it or not. Remember that."

Pat Donovan spat. He said, "I'll remember your talk a devil of a long time. Who do you think you are, you—"

There was a minute's silence. Then she heard Neil's heel turn on the pebbles. It made a grating sound. She heard him walk away on hard heels and the body of the loaded cart creak sharply as he climbed in and spoke to the horse.

She heard Pat Donovan follow him for a few shuffling steps, stand looking after him and swear again for the benefit of the other fishermen. One of them laughed.

When Neil rode behind the building his face was very angry. His dark eyes blazed. He sprang down, picked up Molly, still wrapped in the folds of the rug, and put her on the seat. Then he swung himself up beside her and drove the horse at a gallop out into the narrow frozen road, through the marshes.

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

In this barren space the wind bore down hard on them. It cut their cheeks and clouded their eyes with water. But the sun, rising bright behind, was reflected even more brightly, though softly too, from the pines and fir trees which covered the side of The Hill, looming high and smooth ahead. They were both staring fixedly at The Hill, as if it now held the hopes of both; as if, now that Neil's had joined with Molly's, the bundle she clutched was too small to house them, and both together had flown into the fastness of The Hill.

The two rode more and more slowly out of the marshes and crossed the main road. Now they were more than a mile inland. Elms, beeches, and poplars lined both sides of the road, breaking the wind. The road was still sandy but the colour was changing to warm greys and reds. It began a gentle ascent. There were patches of snow among the trees but it did not look cold. The wind was kept out but the sun came in, painting the dappled back of the horse, the steel rims of the wheels, dripping light and warmth.

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Molly stirred inside the heavy rug.

Neil looked down at her. His face was no longer angry. He smiled.

"You all right there, Molly?"

She said, "I don't need all this rug. Let's put it over both of us."

"Sure? You must have been ice to your bones."

"I was. But not any more."

He stopped the horse. She stood up. He drew the rug from behind her. She looked down and saw that the seat was covered with a heavy plaid wool blanket, the horse's blanket. The colour of it was beautiful. She sat down on it, catching her breath in a sigh of wonder at so much beauty, so much comfort. Neil spread the rug over their knees and bent across her to tuck it in securely on her outer side. Then he tucked it round himself. Now they were sitting very close, their arms and shoulders, their whole sides touching.

Still he did not pick up the reins. He said, "Look at me, Molly."

It was very hard for her to do, still, but she did it slowly. He studied her face, smiling down at it. He said, "Why do you always keep turned away so much? Why are you always looking down?"

She answered painfully, "Because they told me——"

He interrupted her. "Don't say it. Don't repeat anything they ever told you. Whatever it was, it was lies. Nothing but lies."

He found her hand under the warm rug. He slipped off his glove and held her bare hand. She had never had gloves.

He said very gently, "After this, only remember what I tell you, Molly. Because I tell you only what is true. Your eyes are the colour of purple pansies. If you would open them wide they would be big and sweet. Open your lovely eyes wide for me, Molly. Your forehead is high and so white. White as milk. Your nose is slender. There are little shadows in your cheeks, little three-cornered bluish shadows. Your mouth is red. Deep red. It is beautiful, but it is very sad. I have never seen it any way but sad. Does your mouth know how to smile, Molly?"

She shook her head very slightly, staring back at him. She thought, if I could only tell you how you look, Neil. If I could only tell you how you look to me.

His hand closed even more strongly over hers. When he spoke again there was a new content in his voice, a thread of excitement, too. He said confidently as the wheels began to turn again, "It will learn. I can wait. Some day it will show me."

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They were no longer east but south of The Hill. The Hill was at their right hand. The sun was warm on their shoulders but not warm enough to melt the snow, which lay like wool over the roots of trees, bushes, and long brown grass.

Neil looked at the sun and said, " It's nearly eight o'clock—"

The road began to descend. The Hill was slipping behind them, standing smooth and staunch between them and the sea. The sunlight gave it a gilded top. Now there was no more sand.

There were no other people. They had not seen a house since crossing the main road. The boy and the girl and the horse were all there was.

Neil said: " The next roof you see will be ours."

Round the turn he pointed it out with his whip. The corner of a gable and the top of a big chimney.

Neil said, " You're trembling, Molly."

She could not think what to say to him, she was feeling so many things for which she had no words.

She cried suddenly, " There is smoke coming out ! "

He looked proud. He said, " A little. I lit a fire on the way down. I couldn't take you into a cold house."

So he had been getting ready for her in the dark hours of the night. He had known well enough she might be with him when he came back.

She said, " Then you—then we must have a range ! "

He looked prouder still. " Yes. We haven't got much but we have got a range. I had it put in on Tuesday."

" Oh, Neil ! "

He added quickly, " Not a new one. But a good one. With an oven, and a tank for heating water, and a shelf where you can put food to keep hot."

" Oh, Neil. I never saw such a range as that must be."

Now he could hardly wait to show it to her. He snapped the whip to quicken the horse's pace.

They rounded the last curve of the narrow clay road, came out of the trees into a clearing, and were before the house.

It must have been like other houses Molly had seen, except that it was painted red. The fishermen's houses on the shore were not so fine, but up along the main road there were many which had been built in the same period—houses with a central chimney and two windows on either side of the front door.

But it seemed to her that she had never seen another house which in any way compared with this. Its red was softened by time to a pale rosy colour. The sun shone softly on its tiny panes of blurry glass ; the little field lay cornerwise like an apron

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tied to its side; and trees stood behind the field, spreading back higher and higher, like serried ranks of protection, until they reached The Hill.

Neil stopped the horse in the yard. "Well, what do you think, Molly?"

She said, "I think I'm going to cry."

"Here, now," he exclaimed disapprovingly. "Wouldn't that be a silly thing to do?"

So Molly promised, "I won't cry, Neil."

He jumped down and held up his arms to her. She slid down between them, stiff with cold but feeling light all through her. The snow purred under their feet.

He said, "You don't weigh much, Molly, for such a tall girl. Go on in. I'll take the horse into the barn and put his blanket on him. Then I'll come."

He held out a big iron key and she took it. But when he came back from the grey barn across the road she had not moved. She said, "I'd rather see it first with you, Neil."

He was pleased that she had waited. He found himself strangely pleased with all she did.

No path had been laid to the green door. There were only the tracks of his boots for her to step in. She could feel him close behind her. On the slab of granite which was the doorstep, she stood and watched his hand turning the key in the lock. The lock was rusty and the key grated. It was the only sound anywhere. She saw his hand, young, chapped by the cold, lean, and hard.

He put his arm round her and drew her inside with him.

The hall was small, with narrow stairs going up from it and doors opening from left and right. He opened the one to the right.

This was the kitchen. Molly's kitchen. It had three small windows. The walls were whitewashed, satin-smooth. There was a slate sink in one corner, with a table beside it and two cane-bottomed chairs. On the other side stood the range, low and black. She could see the glow of fire through the bars.

Molly ran to the range. She bent over it, spread her hands above it. Her face was very close to its top. She could have kissed it.

She said, "Oh, Neil! It's the handsomest stove I ever saw!"

He nearly burst with pride. He muttered, "Open these dampers here—get more heat."

He pulled out a damper in the front and another in the flue. The fire leapt up. He took off a cover and had an iron poker with which to reach in and stir up the coals.

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"Oh, Neil," cried Molly, "let me!"

She wanted to get closer to that fire. She wanted to use it.

He gave her the poker. She stirred the coals. They glowed at her and made little licking flames out of the last of the big sticks he had left there in the night. She felt her cheeks growing pink and soft.

He said, "One thing, we've got plenty of wood—and it's good and dry, too; brought it down here last week. Cut it into lengths on Wednesday and Thursday. Hauled up a load of faggots from a piece of land that's just been cleared. It's all out there in the shed."

Molly stared at him.

He added proudly, "I'm going to buy that land, too, some day. It joins my pasture. It won't have big trees on it again for a good many years, but it'll have small stuff for the fire to last a lifetime."

A lifetime! He looked as far ahead as that!

Molly felt as if he were going away from her, leaving this warm kitchen already, going out through the woods and into all the years ahead. It frightened her. She put her hand on his arm to keep him. It was the first time she had ever touched him of her own accord.

He came back instantly. His hand closed over hers, keeping it there. He smiled down at her.

He said, "Yes, Molly. There's a good deal we've still to get. But just now we've got wood. And we've got water."

He showed it to her, in two big buckets by the sink. He told her he had brought it last night from the spring at the edge of the field. He told her he had cleaned out that spring last week and the water in it was as sweet and good as ever flowed out of God's earth anywhere. He held a big ladle for her to drink from.

She said, "It is good, Neil. The best water I've ever tasted. Water down—down there always has a brackish taste." But she had not meant to think of down there. She added quickly, admiringly, "You did all that last week!"

He looked proud again.

He said, "Yes. It was quite a week. But that's only a beginning. We've got wood. And we've got water. And—"

He opened a door on the north wall of the kitchen into a long narrow room with a little hearth in the chimneyside. Filling one whole end there was a great four-poster bed. At the opposite end there was a wooden chest.

Neil said, "Bedding is in there—blankets and such. Just as Grandma left it. I looked in. I think it is all right." He sounded gruff.

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He opened another door by the fire-place, still leading Molly. "This was Grandma's spare room," he said, "where her visitors slept."

This room was square; the same size as the kitchen. The walls were of grey plaster, with panelling painted a dull green. It had a small wooden bedstead, a large home-made chest of drawers of some dark wood; a cane-bottomed rocking-chair.

Neil said gruffly, "It's like the North Pole in here, but towards night I can build a roaring fire to take the chill off for you. Perhaps you'll want to—put your clothes in the drawers."

She still carried her bundle in one arm. He took it from her and set it on the little bed.

"I'll see what there is to eat," he said.

He left her. He looked troubled. She had never seen him look like that before.

She stood without moving for many minutes. At last she went slowly to her bundle and opened it, taking out a box and a brush.

She took off her shawl and brushed out her hair, bending over to brush it up all round; it was long and heavy. Sparks flew from it. Then she straightened and brushed it down.

There was a looking-glass above the chest of drawers. She stole towards it, fearful but fascinated. She stood staring at her own reflection, trying to see there what Neil had said he saw. Her hands came up like the hands of another and the fingers parted the heavy hair; it glowed like the fire; a deep ruddy chestnut. She stood staring a minute longer, touching her cheeks wonderingly with icy finger-tips, then snatched up the box and hurried back into the kitchen.

The warmth of the fire reached out to her as Neil's arms had reached up to lift her down from the cart.

The warmth was like Neil. To Molly, all warmth was Neil.

He had opened the oven door and she stood in the corner it made. He had drawn up the table and two chairs within the circle of warmth and set two bowls on it. Two wide blue bowls with chipped edges. Now he closed the cupboard door and came bringing a thick slab of yellow cheese, a knife, and two silver teaspoons.

He had not heard her come and glanced up, surprised to see her there.

A tall thin girl in a bunched, faded blue dress, too big all over for her; clean and neatly patched.

But he was not looking at her clothes. He was looking at her face framed in the ruddy chestnut hair with a fiery glow in

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its thickness; an oval face, with pink from the heat on the cheekbones above the bluish shadows; wide purple eyes; and red lips drooping at the corners, but not so much sad, now, as uncertain; soft and tremulous.

He said in an awed voice, "Molly——"

She was looking back at him. She did not stop looking.

He dropped what he carried on to the table, took her in his arms and kissed her.

They stood there for a long still minute in the corner of the oven door.

Then he drew back.

He said quietly, "Perhaps I shouldn't have. But I couldn't help it. Don't be frightened. Sit down. We'll have some breakfast."

He pulled out a chair for her. He poured out tea from a pot on the stove. He took bread, toasted brown, from the oven. He cut the cheese and passed her a piece on the point of the knife.

She said with a little sigh, "This is good. You can do everything. Neil, I wish I could do something, too."

He smiled at her. "Soon I shall have to go to sell my fish. Then you can do whatever you want to."

They ate hungrily. The fire crackled.

She asked, "Who do you sell the fish to, Neil?"

"Everybody round here. The neighbours. And people in the villages."

"How near is the nearest village?"

"About six miles."

"How near is the nearest neighbour?"

"About a mile."

She was glad of distance and of the woods encircling their house and field.

A little later she said, "I expect you only *swept* the floor."

He glanced at her quickly. His eyes caught a light in hers; almost a twinkle. He tried to conceal his pleasure by scowling.

"What do you mean by that, my girl? That I didn't wash it?"

The light increased. It was a twinkle. She said demurely, "Well, did you?"

He thought, she is going to be happy! He shook his head, pretending to feel sheepish.

She said with contentment, "I shall wash it." Now she looked proud.

She lifted back the lid of the wooden box she had kept in her lap. It had once held fish-hooks. She put it on the table between them, with the lid off. It was full of sea sand.

"What is that for?" he asked. though he knew.

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She said happily, " It is to scour the floor with. While you are gone I shall wash it with this and when you get back you will see how much whiter it is. I'll keep on using it until the floor is as white as ever your grandmother had it. You can bring me sand whenever you go down——"

She broke off. Her face changed. She said, " Neil ! After today perhaps he won't sell fish to you ! "

Neil flushed with the old anger. He pushed back his bowl and stood up. He said, " He will sell me fish. Or there are other fishermen who will."

Molly stared at him bleakly. She said, " But the other places are so much farther away ! "

Neil could not bear to see her face changed back. He choked down his anger. He picked up the bowl and drained it of tea, with his finger hooked over the rim. Then he put it down, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and smiled at her.

He said lightly, " Don't worry, Molly. I never worry."

He went round the table and touched her gleaming hair. He said gently, " Anyway, Molly, don't worry about anything today. This is our day."

She kept on looking up at him, her face tilted, until he kissed her again, drawing her up against him. He did not think that she was frightened this time. He thought rather that she was reassured.

He went out whistling softly, and when she went to the door to wave to him as he rode off on the high seat of the cart, he was whistling still. He only stopped to smile at her as he waved back. And as he went out of sight down the long hill, his whistling came back above the rumbling of the wheels in the snowy frozen ruts, above the squeaking of his cart.

*And 'twas there that Annie Laurie . . .*

She did not close the door until there was not even an echo on the air.

Then she closed it quickly.

Now she was alone. And the first thing she did was, in a way, a surprising thing.

She stood still within her kitchen and puckered her lips. She blew out her breath and heard the soft clear sound it made. Her eyes widened like a child's. Her hands came together in wonder and hushed delight. Then she put one hand on each side of her throat and whistled first a high note and then a low note.

She looked at the range and said, " Well ! "

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Still looking at the range as if for sign of astonishment, she slowly whistled all the notes of the scale up and down again.

She laughed aloud and this frightened her. She glanced hastily, fearfully, round the room. Grave again, she said to the range, "It was me, wasn't it? I did it, didn't I?"

The fire continued to crackle gently, amiably. The beating of her heart quietened.

She whistled all through the tune which Neil had gone away whistling. She whistled it several times, each time more confidently.

*. . . Gie'd me her promise true.*

She said, "I promised him I would work."

So she began to work. Her hands moved fast here. Her feet did not drag. Her hands flew, and her feet, like brown wings. She found hot water in the tank for washing up, not only the few things which they had used but others from the cupboard, among them a big pink soup tureen and a great silver ladle which she held against her cheek for an instant; and she heated more for washing the floor.

She scattered the white sand from her box like a farmer sowing good seed. She scrubbed not only the floor but the window frames, and wiped down the walls, holding the little tablet of soap between her hands from time to time to smell deep of it, as if it were a flower.

In some curious way she became a part of all she worked with, of every object she touched, because she touched each so tenderly that she seemed to reach deep and to draw from it a strength, a serenity, a beauty which belonged then to herself.

She lost all sense of time. And she whistled, over and over, the same tune.

Neil heard her whistling when he let himself into the house, towards night.

*And it's there that Annie Laurie*
*Gie'd me her promise true—*

He stood still in surprise and pleasure. It was as if all the summer birds had suddenly come back, bringing with them many whose lyric voices he had never heard before. Then she heard his voice, singing beyond the closed kitchen door, low in the first words but growing deeper, surer, with every line.

*Which ne'er forgot will be!*
*And for bonnie Molly Hartwell*
*I'd lay me doon and dee!*

There was a startled hush and then she came running to open the door. Opening, she moved backwards with the door, standing

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behind it, her eyes very big as if he might, revealed, be a stranger.

He smiled at her. His arms were full of parcels wrapped in paper. He came in and put them down on the table. Then he looked over his shoulder at her, still smiling. "But you aren't Molly Hartwell yet, are you?"

She shook her head, staring at him.

He said, "We'll take care of that immediately after supper."

He held out his hand. "Come here, Molly."

She came and stood in the circle of his arm.

He kissed her hair, then her temples, and then her lips. His own were very gentle.

He said softly, "Don't go on being afraid of me, Molly. I couldn't stand it. You won't ever have any reason—"

She whispered, "I know, Neil."

The stare had gone out of her eyes. He kissed her once more, still gently. He said, "You're getting happy, aren't you, Molly? It was good to come in and hear you whistling."

"I never have before. I didn't know I could."

"Well, you can, can't you?"

"I have. All day. I didn't even notice till now, that it was nearly night."

"Then you were happy."

"I suppose—I was. I've been cleaning. Look at what I did."

"I'd rather look at you."

"Please look at the kitchen."

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to go into another room."

"All right, I shall."

"Oh, no, you won't. The kitchen looks like a palace."

He was not looking at it at all. He was looking at her all the time. She said, "I washed the china and the windows and the walls and the floor. It's clean. Every inch of it."

"It's the cleanest room I ever saw."

"You aren't looking at it."

"Yes, I am. Through you."

"Neil. Please."

He let her go. He said, "It's too dark to see anything but you. It would never be too dark to see you. You shine. If I must see the room, let's have a light."

"I found some candles in the cupboard."

"No. Wait."

He took the wrapping from some of the packages on the table. There was a lamp with a big pink bowl and cloudy white spots on the pink; a tall chimney with a fluted top, a brass mantle, and a box of wicks. He filled the bowl with oil from the can under the sink, fitted the wick into the mantle, screwed the

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mantle on, lighted it, and covered the flame with the chimney.

He stood back. "What do you think of that, Molly?"

She had not been thinking of it. She had hardly seen it. Her eyes had been fixed on his hands as they moved, and risen to his face as the match and then the wick flared, first outlining his features as if by a thread of fire, making his eyes look deep-set and dark, and then as the flame went smooth within the protection of the glass, flooding his whole face with warm light. She felt, it is so he has set his glass about me today. And he says I shine. As the light shines. Being a woman, she shifted her gaze instinctively as he turned towards her, and fixed it on the lamp. He had said the room looked like a palace. Then the lamp was king; the flame was the queen.

Her hands came together softly. She said, as she had of the range in the morning, in the same awed voice, "Oh, Neil! That's the handsomest lamp I ever saw!"

She knew they were married now.

They ate their supper of new bread she had baked, and halibut he had brought back. After that he showed her what else he had brought. A new shawl, deep-fringed and heavy, of a bright brown colour to match her hair; and a soft-blue hood and gloves which he said his mother had knitted of fine wool and sent, "with my love."

Molly could not speak. She sat holding this warmth, this richness, this soft beauty on her lap, stroking it, fingering it, like a creature in a dream, until Neil said: "Come now, Molly, put them on. I told the Minister seven o'clock."

Then she knew what he meant. She stood up and went through the back bedroom into the east room, for she had left her brush there. Neil had built a blaze of fire on the hearth. As she stood staring at it, she knew what she would do.

She took the white big ewer from the chest of drawers and carried it to the kitchen to fill it with warm water. She went back quietly, and poured the water into the big flowered bowl, took off all her clothes and knelt on the rug before the fire to wash herself. She had not done so in the firelight since she was a child. There had never been anywhere to do so.

She saw the light play over her white body. She felt the warmth of the fire on her arms, her shoulders, her long thin legs and slender feet with soles hardened from running on the cliffs. She saw the whiteness of herself turn rosy from the firelight and the fire warmth. She began to tingle from the heat of the fire and a small growing excitement within herself.

Then she scooped up water in both hands and let it stream down over her. Warm as it was, it felt cool as brook water on a

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summer day. She rubbed her body with the white lather she had made of the soap between her hands. It was like a liquid ointment, like an oil, sweet with no other fragrance than cleanliness. Now even she could see her own shining. She could feel the shining in her own eyes.

She stood tall, cold, and clean, and stepped with her long white feet into the bowl and poured clear water over her shoulders from the ewer. Now it felt warm again, warm as a little pool of sea-water left lying between rocks when the tide goes out, but cleaner than that, crystal-clean and clear; the water from a spring ever-bubbling from beneath the west side of The Hill.

She laughed and the sound did not surprise her. It was very low, but true, like her first whistling. She dried herself and spilt her few bits of clothing out of the bundle on the bed. She stood clean in her clean shift before the fire and brushed and recombed her hair. Seeing her face in the looking-glass, she saw it smiling.

*Your eyes are the colour of purple pansies: Big and sweet. Your forehead is high and so white. White as milk. Your nose is slender. There are little shadows in your cheeks. Little three-cornered bluish shadows. Your mouth is red. Deep red—*

She thought: It knows how to smile, Neil! It knows!

He had said, "It will learn. I can wait."

She put on the same dress. She had no other. But when she put on the new brown deep-fringed shawl, the blue hood and gloves, only a little of the dress showed. Nobody could have looked more a lady.

She took one last look into the mirror, still smiling. She went out of the room, lit only by the dying fire, walking with a new grace which she could feel. She was taking her smile to Neil.

But his own solemnity struck it from her before she had come out of the back bedroom into the lamplight.

He was waiting with his coat on, his cap and gloves in his hand. To him this was a most solemn moment. He did not know they were already married. He turned and said gently: "All ready, Molly?"

She answered him, suddenly hushed, "Yes, Neil."

He took her hand and put it under his arm as if for a stately dance. He turned down the lamp and they went out of the big door together. There was no moon. Only the stars looked down, like polka-dots on a dark blue cloth.

The horse was already hitched into the cart. Neil took the blanket from him and laid it, neatly folded, on the seat. He lifted Molly, swung himself up, tucked the rug over them, spoke to the horse, and as they rode off did not speak again.

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His hand found Molly's under the fur, but now they both wore gloves. Their hands said no more than their voices.

Molly wished she knew what he was thinking, to keep him so quiet. For her the night was full of peace. Peaceful sky and stars, peaceful turning of the wheels, peaceful light in the kitchen windows of the few farmhouses they passed.

One of these lights they did not pass. Neil stopped and hitched his horse at a post before it. He lifted Molly down and they went together up a narrow path. Neil knocked on the door. An old man opened it and asked them in. He wore a black coat and a flowing black tie and a gold watch-chain swung across his waistcoat. The only hair he had was a silver ring just above his neck and about his gleaming bald pink head. He looked a very great gentleman, Molly thought.

Neil said, " Good evening, sir. This is Molly Donovan."

The old man took Molly's mittened hand and said, " How do you do, my dear? "

These were the only words she heard clearly. She did not answer them. She did not feel as if she were there. The peace of the night wrapped her heart as the shawl and hood closed sweetly about her body. She saw Neil take a paper from his pocket. The old man put on spectacles to look at it, and nodded. He smiled kindly at them both and led them through another doorway into the little chapel where a chubby little woman sat, a warm little old woman and a younger one. The old woman took Molly's left hand and patted it and drew the glove off. Molly felt as far from her as a tall flower does from a kitten.

The old man stood before Neil and Molly, fingering his watch-chain and saying words which they repeated after him. Molly did not know until a long time afterwards what they were.

Then Neil put a wide thin gold band on her finger. He kissed her. But it was not like a kiss at all. This morning she would not have known. But now she knew. She had been married a long time. The old man said, " God bless you both," and went to his desk to write.

The chubby woman slipped the blue glove back on Molly's hand. Until now, Molly had not known why she had taken it, nor that she still had it. But inside her glove she felt secretly at the ring, moving it between her fourth and third fingers.

Neil said at the door, " Thank you, sir." Then they were outside again, back on the cart, riding home in dark peace.

Inside the kitchen Neil turned up the lamp and put a log into the fire. He hung up his cap, laying his gloves on the shelf. Molly put her shawl and gloves next to his.

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She thought, tomorrow I shall fold them and put them away. They should not be left hanging. But tonight they will stay beside his. She turned towards him slowly.

He stood by the table watching her. He smiled. He did not move towards her. His hands hung at his sides.

He said gently, " Well, Molly Hartwell? ". The name sounded like a valentine. His voice was like a valentine.

She stood with her hands clasped against her skirt. Her eyes were about as high as the top button of his jacket.

She said, " Well, Neil ? "

Neither of them knew what next to say. In the silence Neil cleared his throat. " I suppose I'd better be making up your fire for you. It's probably down."

He came past her where she stood at the end of the stove and picked up an armful of birch logs. But as he passed her coming back, she stopped him with a hand on his arm.

She felt him stiffen. He looked down at her. Then the wood fell to the floor at their feet. His arms were both round her.

He said, " Molly ! "

" You said I would learn, Neil. I have learnt. Haven't I ? "

" Molly, it's the sweetest smile I ever saw. Molly, what does it mean ? "

She could not have told him. But she did not need to tell him. He could see.

A little later he put the birch logs on the pile. She was bringing her bundle from the chill room where she had spread no covers on the bed that day. She was putting her few things in the wooden chest in the back bedroom, nearly empty since she had taken out the yellowed linen sheets smelling of lavender and the patchwork quilts, and tucked them over the mattress which puffed up when she had smoothed it like a loaf of light, risen bread.

Did ever any other woman whistle on her wedding-night? But had any other woman so good a reason? Was ever any other woman Molly Hartwell?

Neil, hearing her, came in singing low as he had sung in the later afternoon: " *And for bonnie Molly Hartwell, I'd lay me doon and dee . . .*"

They smiled at each other.

So it was the beginning for these two. And not so had it ever been for any other man and woman west of The Hill.

* * *

*When you have finished reading this copy of* ARGOSY, *why not pass it on to a member of H.M. Forces ?*

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# SONG OF WALES

**The land of mountains, Lloyd George, trout, excursionists, jackdaws, slate, castles, rain, bards, and a Celtic language**

KAREL CAPEK, *Letters from England*

*In the dear lovely land of Wales, when the young trees 'gan to burgeon, for thee, my tall slender lass, my heart leapt with longing.*

*In the dear lovely land of Wales, on many a summer's day, we sate us down side by side upon the green bracken.*

*In the dear lovely land of Wales, with snow all around us, the New Year finds thee lying warm within mine arms.*

JOHN SAMPSON, *Romani Poems*

## *Eisteddfod*

The ceremony of the Gorsedd begins. The great sword is unsheathed. One by one the druids advance and place their hands on it. The Chief Druid lifts up his voice and cries in Welsh:

"Is there peace?"

He cries this three times. Three times comes a reassuring shout from the crowd:

"There is peace!"

A lady of beauty, who is not a green novate but a red lady who evidently represents the aristocratic laity, advances over uneven grass bearing the huge Horn of Plenty. She kneels before the Chief Druid and offers the relic to him. I expect him to drink from it, or in some way prove its plentifulness, but, as the horn is empty, he merely touches it symbolically and the lady bows and backs gracefully away with her burden.

The Chief Druid, mounted on the altar stone, then delivers a long speech in Welsh. I cannot understand one word of it, but I can tell that it is a good and well-prepared piece of oratory. The crowd love it. The words come rushing out like a stream in flood.

He is followed by other speakers. Some appear to be making epigrams at which the crowd laughs. There are prayers in Welsh. I imagine that the old Gods of the Celtic peoples are

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stirring uneasily in their dim Valhalla. Then one by one, the newly-elected bards are led to the altar stone. These are young men and women singled out during the past year for some work of poetry, music, or prose.

The Chief Druid shakes each one by the hand, calls them by their modern names, and gives to each one a bardic name by which he, or she, will be for ever after known in the Gorsedd.

The ceremony is over. The procession re-forms. Druid, Bard, and Novate go their solemn way. The great Gorsedd Sword moves slowly above the heads of the crowd. The Horn of Plenty shines a moment in a burst of early sun. The Eisteddfod is opened . . .

H. V. MORTON, *In Search of Wales*

## *Welsh Leg!*

*I shall never forget that first Welsh leg of mutton which I tasted, rich but delicate, replete with juices derived from the aromatic herbs of the noble Berwyn, cooked to a turn and weighing just four pounds.*

GEORGE BORROW, 1803–1881, *Wild Wales*

## *Devil's Bridge*

The River Rheidol rises near the sources of the Severn and Wye, and runs south through a deepening gorge to Pont-Erwyd. From here to Devil's Bridge the gorge is narrow and often precipitous, and the stream runs with a fine foamy grace which ever and again boils to fury among the boulders and pot-holes. Of Devil's Bridge itself, what may be said? Since first the Prince of Darkness was tricked into throwing a heavenly stone bridge across one of its cataracts, it has lived through a bad sonnet by Wordsworth, a light railway, a charabanc invasion and a holiday camp, a turnstile at which you pay a shilling, a million postcards, plain and coloured, and last of all the murderous axes of the Ministry of Supply. But Cleopatra was as alluring to her last lover as to her first, and Devil's Bridge remains one of the glories of Wales.

GWYN JONES, *A Prospect of Wales*

## *In the Air*

*Lovely the woods, waters, meadows, combes, vales,*
*All the air things wear that build this world of Wales . . .*

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS, *In the Valley of the Elwy*

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## *Caernarfon Tower*

*One night of tempest I arose and went*
*Along the Menai shore on dreaming bent;*
*The wind was strong, and savage swung the tide,*
*And the waves blustered on Caernarfon side.*

*But on the morrow, when I passed that way,*
*On Menai shore the hush of heaven lay;*
*The wind was gentle and the sea a flower,*
*And the sun slumbered on Caernarfon tower.*

R. S. THOMAS, *from the Welsh, traditional*

## *Angel Voices*

One night we repaired to an inn on the side of the River Usk. It was a convivial place. I talked to some of Andy's farmer friends who bewailed the lack of useful agricultural labour. Our discussion was interrupted by an invasion of women with, in their midst, one solitary male charabanc-driver. He looked as nervous as a captive among the females of a Bedouin tribe, and accepted a glass of stout from his dismounted passengers with an air of mingled suspicion and resignation.

The ladies, for the most part, took gin. None were young, few handsome, but all radiated good cheer. When their second drink came up, the ringleader, a plump matron in purple, waved a slow arm. Her companions formed a half-circle in front of her, and, at a signal, broke into the song, *Sospan Bach*. The singing in a Welsh inn is always good; never a rowdy bawling. But this performance was extra special. If the singers were more homely than enticing, the quality of voice belonged with the angels.

There were riotous encores. The ladies obliged with *Bless this House*, and one listener wept freely. Finally, two of the old dears entranced Andy and me by rendering *My Brother Silvest* with more vigour than we had heard it receive from any battalion of fighting men. While the audience cried for more the ladies vanished as silently as they had come, their driver, distinguished by his peaked hat, swept away with them like a non-swimmer in a flood.

THOMAS FIRBANK, *A Country of Memorable Honour*

## *Cymru am Byth!*

*. . . the land of all that is beautiful in nature, and all that is lovely in women.*

THOMAS LOVE PEACOCK, 1785–1866, *Merionethshire*

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# DEAR DEPARTURE

**Dr. Maltby had never seen the young widow look more beautiful**

## by NORMAN EDWARDS

MR. ANSON waited patiently while the servants filed in and seated themselves. Of course they knew they were mentioned in the will, otherwise they would not have been told to be present in the drawing-room at three o'clock.

All of them were in some kind of mourning. Even Stebbings the gardener had a black band on the left arm of his jacket; and Polly and Jane, the maids, were wearing purple-coloured blouses they had borrowed from a friend in the village. Only Mrs. Smith, the housekeeper, was in deep mourning: a black dress of severe cut which, it was understood, she had worn when her first husband had died forty years ago, and also when her second husband had died thirty-eight years ago.

As Stebbings, Polly, Jane, Grayson the chauffeur, and Mrs. Smith settled on their chairs, Mr. Anson glanced at the widow, Mrs. Lane, and then at Dr. Maltby, who stood behind her. Mr. Anson blinked. He felt that he was in the presence of deep grief, and it disturbed him.

Mrs. Lane, in widow's weeds, sat huddled in an armchair near the fire. Like Niobe, Mr. Anson thought, all tears. Not that she was crying, or that he could see any tears, but her limp body and the lowered head obscured by the widow's veil suggested exhaustion, and a sorrow that was more expressive than tears.

Mr. Anson was waiting for his cue from Mrs. Lane, but she paid no heed to him. It was Dr. Maltby who, by a hint of a nod, confirmed Mr. Anson's belief that he should now start to read that part of the will that concerned the domestic staff. This he proceeded to do in a voice which he hoped was traditionally dry and legal in tone but which, in fact, was a trifle too buoyant for such a solemn moment.

After the usual preamble, in which the late George Lane declared himself to be in full possession of his faculties, he recited the trite words acknowledging the deceased's appreciation of the services of Alfred Stebbings, gardener, bequeathing him the sum of one hundred pounds. At the news of this expected



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legacy Stebbings sniffed—whether appreciatively or in disappointment, Mr. Anson was uncertain. But when Polly and Jane learned that their late master had left them fifty pounds apiece, they burst into subdued sobs; but sobs of such timbre as convinced Mr. Anson that the girls were emotionally overwhelmed by a judicious mixture of grief because of the manner in which they had become due for the money and satisfaction at the thought of being the recipients of a nice little nest-egg.

A slight frown on Grayson's face, which appeared when he heard that he had been bequeathed a similar sum, indicated his annoyance that he had not been left more than Polly and Jane; but when Mrs. Smith was informed that she inherited two hundred and fifty pounds under her late master's will, she bowed her head and, revealing only the neat middle parting in her white hair, prevented Mr. Anson from judging by her face her reactions to the late Mr. George Lane's beneficence.

"That," announced Mr. Anson, "concludes those portions of the late Mr. Lane's will concerning his benefactions—generous benefactions, if I may say so—to the members of his domestic staff."

He stared hard at Mrs. Smith, who had by now lifted her head, and by the meaning look on his face indicated that the moment had arrived when Mrs. Smith might shepherd her flock out of the drawing-room.

And with suitably compassionate looks on their faces as they glanced at their mistress, one by one, the staff tiptoed out of the over-furnished Victorian drawing-room. As the door closed behind Mrs. Smith with a soft click, Mr. Anson sighed. He looked wistfully at the large silver tray on a side-table, and at the glasses and decanters on the tray. Mr. Anson had had a trying day, and he felt in need of a refresher. But he was a man who always put business before refreshment, so he turned in his chair and looked gravely at the widow.

"The rest you know, Mrs. Lane. Apart from the legacies to the staff, everything is left to you."

By a slight movement of her right hand, which hung limply over the arm of her chair, Mrs. Lane showed that she was listening. Dr. Maltby stood motionless like a sentry. Mr. Anson stirred irritably in his seat. For a young doctor Maltby was all right—in fact, excellent—but he was too self-contained. There was no need for that rigid immobility. However . . .

"It will be a few weeks before I can give you full and explicit details, Mrs. Lane," continued Mr. Anson, "but I have made a rough estimate. After death duties have been paid, and apart from the value of this house and its contents, I estimate that

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the sum of not less than one hundred and seventy thousand pounds will be—er—at your disposal. And now, if you will permit me, I shall take my leave, as I have an appointment in a quarter of an hour."

For the first time since she had sat down in the big chair after they had all returned from the funeral, Mrs. Lane spoke. "Thank you, Mr. Anson," she murmured. "You have been very kind, and very helpful."

Slowly she lifted her arm and extended her hand. Mr. Anson jumped up. He wanted to kiss her hand, and it shocked him. He had never kissed a woman's hand in his life, and the impulse to do so now surprised and unnerved him. He grabbed her hand and shook it with fervour, muttered a string of banal condolences, and then turned, and hurried towards the door. As he opened it he heard Dr. Maltby speak quietly behind him: "I'll see you to your car, Anson."

As he stood in the long, dismal hall while the doctor helped him to put on his overcoat, Mr. Anson again experienced a feeling of irritation. He knew that Dr. Maltby was only thirty-five or six, but his professional gravity got on Mr. Anson's nerves. Ever since Dr. Maltby had bought the small practice from old Dr. Jones, Mr. Anson had found the young doctor vaguely irritating. And for no real reason at all except that the fellow was so reserved, so very much the serious medico.

That was all very well at a patient's bedside and in the surgery, but even on social occasions—at dinner parties and so on, when Mr. Anson and the doctor often met—the man never relaxed. His professional manner hung around him like a cloak. And yet, what a good fellow he is, thought Mr. Anson, as Dr. Maltby opened the door for him. A first-class doctor. No trouble too great for him. Always ready and willing to turn out at all hours for patients who often could not afford to pay his fees.

"Sad day, very sad," mumbled Mr. Anson, as he wound a thick scarf around his throat. "She's taken it badly."

"Yes," agreed Dr. Maltby. "I'm afraid she has."

"It was sudden, wasn't it?" asked Mr. Anson.

"The end, yes; but he'd been ill for nearly a year, as you know. Practically bed-ridden."

"Poor chap, poor chap," mumbled Mr. Anson. "Known him nearly all my life. I liked him."

"So did I," said Dr. Maltby. "He was very kind to me—in more ways than one—and I shall always have it on my mind that I didn't get a Harley Street man to see him."

"Didn't you?"

"No. Mr. Lane was—well, difficult. Perhaps obstinate is

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more accurate. He absolutely refused to let me call in someone for a second opinion."

"I know what you mean," said Mr. Anson. "He was always like that. Obstinate. Even at school . . ."

"At school? Were *you* at school with him?"

"Yes."

"I'm surprised. I have always thought of you as a much younger man."

"I'm sixty-four," grunted Mr. Anson. "A year younger than George."

"You do surprise me," said Dr. Maltby, with a smile that suddenly lit up his thin face with charm and mischief. "I can understand now why you have never honoured me with a request to call on you professionally!"

Mr. Anson chuckled. But he couldn't help feeling flattered. "Never had a day's illness in my life," he admitted. "Not many men of my age can say that."

"I'm glad to hear it," answered Dr. Maltby dryly. "Many more like you and I should be out of business."

They both smiled at each other; and Mr. Anson walked down the steps and got into his car with a more genial feeling for the doctor.

"She's—er—all right, isn't she?" he asked, nodding in the direction of the house.

"Yes," answered Dr. Maltby. "Exhausted and nervy, but nothing to worry about. I'll give her a pill. She'll sleep all right."

"She'll get over it," muttered Mr. Anson. "Marry again, I expect. Ought to. She's—how old?"

"I don't know her age," replied Dr. Maltby. "You see, I've only known her for about a year—since Mr. Lane's heart trouble began."

Mr. Anson nodded as he pressed the self-starter button. "I don't mind saying," he said in a sudden rush of words, "that I was surprised when George married her. He'd been a widower for twenty years, you know. Met her in London, I believe, and married her three or four days after being introduced to her. Extraordinary."

"Very," agreed Dr. Maltby. "But she gave him eighteen months of great happiness."

"True, very true," sighed Mr. Anson. "Poor old George." He smiled at the doctor, let in his clutch with a jerk, and drove on his way.

When Dr. Maltby opened the drawing-room door he was

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surprised to hear Mrs. Lane's voice raised in irritated protest. And when he shut it behind him he was again surprised to see Mrs. Smith standing in front of her mistress.

Mrs. Lane was still sitting in the big armchair near the fire, but now she was rigid, and sitting bolt upright, with both hands clutching at the chair-arms. Her widow's veil had slipped down onto her shoulders; and although her mouth had a petulant pout, Dr. Maltby thought that he had never seen her look more beautiful. With her ash-blonde hair that owed nothing to the art of the hairdresser, and her very large grey eyes, set in an oval face of exquisite bone-structure, she was a remarkably striking woman to look at. She glanced impatiently at Dr. Maltby as he came into the room. "You've been a long time," she said.

"Saw Anson to his car, and we chatted a bit," explained Dr. Maltby.

"Sit down, do," demanded Mrs. Lane. "Mrs. Smith and I have been chatting, too. Haven't we, Mrs. Smith?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lane."

Mrs. Smith spoke flatly. She held herself very well for a woman of sixty; and in her severe black dress, and with her silver hair glinting in the firelight, she looked neat and efficient. She adjusted her gold-rimmed spectacles and looked at Mrs. Lane. "Yes," she repeated. "But I hope I haven't chosen an inconvenient time to come and talk to you."

Mrs. Smith pursed her lips a little; and as she did so her nose twitched exactly as a rabbit's nose twitches when it looks up at one from behind the bars of a cage.

"Most inconvenient," said Mrs. Lane curtly. She looked impatiently at her housekeeper and then turned to Dr. Maltby. "She's not satisfied," Mrs. Lane explained, "with her legacy."

"I've been in Mr. Lane's employ ever since I left school," said Mrs. Smith, "and I'm sure I've always done my best to give satisfaction."

Dr. Maltby looked warningly at Mrs. Lane. He knew Mrs. Smith well enough to appreciate her as an excellent servant. It would be very unfortunate if she gave notice. He saw that she wanted tactful handling. When he had first met her he had realized she was a difficult person to handle.

Mrs. Lane understood his warning look, and she made her voice sound a shade more amiable. "I don't know what you expect me to do," she said to Mrs. Smith. "You heard the terms of my husband's will. I can't alter them, can I?"

"Mr. Lane always gave me to understand that I should be treated generously—considering all the years I've been here."

"Mr. Lane remembered that. He left you £250."

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"I expected more than that, Mrs. Lane."

"Well, I'm sorry you have been disappointed, Mrs. Smith. But there's nothing I can do about it, is there?"

"Yes."

"Oh. And what do you think I can do?"

Mrs. Smith's nose twitched sharply; and she answered rather sharply too. "You could increase my wages."

"I see. Yes, perhaps I could. I'll think about it."

"There's no time like the present, Mrs. Lane."

Again Dr. Maltby looked warningly at the widow. And his look meant: "Don't antagonize her. Good servants are scarce these days. Humour her."

Mrs. Lane was intelligent. She nodded her head and then forced a smile to her face. "Very well," she said, tingeing her voice with humorous resignation. "Since you feel so . . . so urgent about it, Mrs. Smith, shall we say another pound a week . . .?"

"I'm afraid that's not enough."

"Not enough?"

"Not nearly enough." Mrs. Smith's nose twitched again. She looked intently at Mrs. Lane and added: "All things considered."

Mrs. Lane frowned. She was a woman of strong character, and opposition riled her. She liked having her own way, and she resented any attempt at coercion. Now she was on the verge of losing her temper, but she made an effort to control herself, because she knew Mrs. Smith to be a reliable and efficient servant. She managed the housekeeping; she cooked to perfection; and she knew how to handle the other servants. Without her, life would be difficult and complicated, and Mrs. Lane disliked domestic problems. She couldn't be bothered with them. And although she had no intention of staying on in the big, gloomy house—had, in fact, every intention of selling it, lock, stock, and barrel, at the earliest possible opportunity—she shied away from the worry and boredom of coping with things.

Only too well Mrs. Lane apprehended the difficulties that would confront her—not the least of the difficulties being the chances of replacing Mrs. Smith. And so with an impatient flick of her hand and a wry glance at Dr. Maltby, she made up her mind not to quibble with Mrs. Smith. She could afford to be generous—temporarily, at any rate—because the moment she had sold the house and found a suitable flat in London, Mrs. Smith would be sacked.

Mrs. Lane smiled as she thought how surprised Mrs. Smith would be if she could see into her mind. Mrs. Lane was young—

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only twenty-eight. Also, she was beautiful; and now she was rich. Her husband was dead. And buried. Her marriage gamble had been a very good one. Very good indeed. Things had turned out as she had hoped they would. So she could afford to put up with Mrs. Smith for a few more months.

"Very well," she said abruptly. "We won't argue about it, Mrs. Smith. I realize that you have spent most of your life in service here—and perhaps the legacy was a little on the small side. I'm quite willing to be generous about an increase in your salary. What do you suggest? Shall we say—another three pounds a week?"

"Not enough," answered Mrs. Smith flatly. "Not nearly enough."

Again Mrs. Lane had to fight hard to keep back her temper. She swallowed with difficulty; but she kept her voice down, and on a level, business-like key.

"Then what do you suggest?" she asked.

Mrs. Smith took her time in replying. She looked at Dr. Maltby; then she looked round the ugly Victorian drawing-room; then up at the ceiling, as if seeking inspiration. Her nose twitched several times as she considered her answer. At last she said slowly: "I haven't really had time to think about it. But let's say £50 a week. To be going on with."

Mrs. Smith's nose twitched rapidly as she looked first at Mrs. Lane and then, more closely, at Dr. Maltby. She smiled shyly down at her clasped hands, and repeated in a calm voice, "To be going on with. We can go into details later on."

"I think you had better go and lie down, Mrs. Smith," said Mrs. Lane evenly. "Obviously, you are feeling . . . feeling the strain of today, and you . . ."

"I'm feeling quite all right, thank you."

"It has been a very trying and tiring day, Mrs. Smith," went on Mrs. Lane. She smiled gently. "I think I know how you feel. Try and understand how I feel. I am—exhausted. Come and see me tomorrow. Then we can discuss . . ."

"There's nothing to discuss."

"Leave the room, please. I shall talk to you . . ."

"Now." Mrs. Smith's nose twitched again; and her hands unclasped themselves in an unexpected and rather urgent movement.

"I think," said Dr. Maltby, slowly getting to his feet, "I think I'd better go . . ."

"No," said Mrs. Smith flatly. "Don't go."

Dr. Maltby looked at Mrs. Lane inquiringly. She shook

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her head. Dr. Maltby helped himself to whisky, and as he added soda water, Mrs. Smith said: "I'll have one too." And then she sat down in an armchair facing Mrs. Lane.

Dr. Maltby hesitated only for a second or two, and then he poured whisky into a tumbler until it was nearly half full. He added a little soda and handed the glass to Mrs. Smith. She took two large gulps, blinked, and then coughed gently. And suddenly a pink flush mounted to her face and her pale blue eyes shone quite brightly behind her glasses. She put her glass down on a table beside her chair.

"Now," she said, "we can have a chat."

Mrs. Lane looked at her in bewilderment. "I can only assume," she said at last, "that you are suffering from nervous strain and that you are . . . that you are not yourself." She glanced at Dr. Maltby. "Perhaps, doctor, you could prescribe a sedative?"

"Yes," agreed Dr. Maltby, "I think I'd better do that."

Mrs. Smith's nose twitched—this time with amusement. "You will never prescribe for me," she assured him. "I'm going to live a long time."

"There is no need to be impertinent, Mrs. Smith," said Dr. Maltby quietly. "You know, I am afraid that you are heading for a nervous break-down."

"I've no intention of having one," Mrs. Smith cheerfully informed him. "I don't need medical treatment. Only *financial* treatment."

Dr. Maltby shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Lane," he said, "but . . ."

"No need to be so formal," interrupted Mrs. Smith. "Call her Lois. Darling, if you like. I suppose you two will get married—after a decent interval? Well, I've no objection. We can live here, the three of us, very comfortably. All things considered."

"So that's it!" blurted out Mrs. Lane, a deep flush flooding up her neck to her face. "You think that because you know that Dr. Maltby and I . . ."

"Of course I know," said Mrs. Smith, a shade impatiently. "You haven't been very discreet, have you?" She looked significantly at the big couch near the wall. "No more of that, if I were you," she said primly. "Polly and Jane might cotton on, too . . . you're very noisy when you make love."

Dr. Maltby sighed. "So you think you should have 'financial treatment' because you have discovered that Mrs. Lane and I love each other?"

"Oh no, doctor," exclaimed Mrs. Smith in a shocked voice.

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" Certainly not! I believe in love. Of course, you were careless—both of you—but I wouldn't *dream* of taking advantage of love." Mrs. Smith seemed upset. She looked reproachfully at Dr. Maltby over the rim of the glass. Her nose twitched as she drank.

" I think love is the most wonderful thing in life," she went on softly. She put her glass down on the table beside her chair with meticulous care. " And I wish you—both of you—all the happiness I knew when I married my second husband. He was first footman here in those days. A grand husband he was. We had one year of great happiness. Then he got pneumonia. I've never really got over my loss."

Mrs. Smith's voice choked a little; and she sniffed once or twice in making an effort to hold back her tears.

Perhaps it was the sniffing that proved too much for Mrs. Lane's self-control, because suddenly she jumped to her feet, her temper quite out of hand.

" You hypocritical old bitch," she said stridently. " Get out! Get out! You're sacked! "

Mrs. Smith was surprised. She rose to her feet and stood, a rather forlorn figure, facing Mrs. Lane. She seemed rather puzzled; but slowly a severe expression of disapproval appeared on her face.

" I knew from the moment I set eyes on you," she said slowly, " that you were no lady. Theatricals, wasn't it? But to use *that* word . . . really! "

Mrs. Smith sat down again. Her eyes met Mrs. Lane's furious gaze tranquilly. " You're vulgar," she said. " But if you and the doctor love each other, I don't mind. Only it will be difficult."

" Difficult? What do you mean, Mrs. Smith? " asked Dr. Maltby.

" I don't like vulgarity," answered Mrs. Smith. " And," she added, " as we *are* going to live together, you will have to mend your ways."

Mrs. Lane looked at Dr. Maltby; and then she laughed—a rather hysterical laugh. " She's mad," she said in a shrill voice. " She's got some preposterous idea in her head because she's found out about us that she . . . that she can blackmail us . . ."

" That's not true," said Mrs. Smith. " I've known for a year that you and the doctor were having a . . . a romance. And I've done my best to help you. Both of you."

" Get out, get out! " ordered Mrs. Lane. " D'you hear me? Get out! "

Mrs. Smith ignored her. She continued to address her remarks to Dr. Maltby in a rather school-mistressy voice. " A clever

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doctor like you ought to have thought of something more—more original," she said. "If you don't mind my saying so."

"But I do mind, Mrs. Smith," answered Dr. Maltby in a quiet but firm tone of voice. "I mind very much indeed. For your sake. You are not well, Mrs. Smith. Please go to your room. I'll come and see you when you are in bed and I can promise you that the sedative I shall give you—"

"No," said Mrs. Smith emphatically. She picked up her glass and drank its contents in one gulp. "She's drunk," muttered Mrs. Lane in disgust. "What are we to do with her?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Smith calmly. "You let me alone and I'll let you alone—and we'll agree to let Mr. Lane alone too. I'm all for a peaceful life, I am. And if you're sensible you will agree to let him rest in peace. Otherwise . . ."

"Otherwise, Mrs. Smith?" asked Dr. Maltby.

"He won't rest in peace," said Mrs. Smith decisively. "A word from me and he'll be . . . be exhumed."

Dr. Maltby looked at Mrs. Lane. Both their faces had gone very pale.

"Marsh's test," exclaimed Mrs. Smith loudly. "Can you face that?"

Dr. Maltby frowned. "What do you know about Marsh's test?" he asked in an almost inaudible voice.

"Enough," replied Mrs. Smith. "I read about it in an encyclopedia years ago. I was interested."

"Why?"

Mrs. Smith smiled sadly. "I fell in love myself years ago," she said in a low voice. "It was just after I'd married Harry that I met James . . ."

Mrs. Smith sat back in her chair and her eyes were suddenly suffused with tears. "Oh dear," she sighed, "it seems only the other day. Harry was a nice man, but when I met James . . . You see, Harry was too old. Too old for me." She sighed heavily, and her nose—now rather red—twitched violently.

"It took me six months," she said in a far-away voice. "Small doses. Something the gardener used for weeds. But I didn't rush it. I took my time. And as Harry had a funny heart, the doctor naturally thought . . ."

"That he died from natural causes and not from poisoning?"

"Yes, of course."

Dr. Maltby jumped up, his lean face suddenly devilish. "Checkmate!" he growled. "You thought you could blackmail us, did you? Well, you old devil, you can't! A murmur out of you about your suspicion that I poisoned Mr. Lane, and

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the police will be told to inquire more closely into the death of your dear Harry. Oh, even after thirty-eight years, Mrs. Smith, his exhumed remains will respond to Marsh's test—the test for arsenic in the human body."

Mrs. Lane began to giggle hysterically. She couldn't help it. She now realized that Mrs. Smith had, so to speak, let more than one cat out of the bag.

And suddenly Dr. Maltby began to laugh too—not that his laughter was pleasant to hear, any more than the look on his face was pleasant to see.

"Checkmate," he repeated. "What's that line—? 'Hoist with your own petard.' That's it! 'Hoist with your own petard.' A word out of you and you will find that Marsh's test will convict you as—yes, why not admit it?—as Marsh's test could convict me."

"And me," giggled Mrs. Lane.

But they both stopped laughing when Mrs. Smith said: "But not me. I had Harry cremated."

★ ★ ★

## *ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD*

PRIZE-WINNERS OF CROSSWORD NO. 7

We are pleased to announce the three winners of Argosy's seventh Prize Crossword Competition:—

Alan L. Astles Esq., Railway Terrace, Derby.

Mrs. A. E. Wainman, Hereford Road, Wheatley Park, Doncaster.

Robin M. Ward Esq., Great Western Terrace, Glasgow, W.2.

These readers, who sent in the first correct solutions to be checked on the closing date, each receive a one-guinea book token.

SOLUTION

Across. 1, *Bullfinch.* 6, *Dutch.* 9, *Alberta.* 10, *Nunnery.* 11, *Kit.* 12, *The King's men.* 14, *Airport.* 15, *Growler.* 17, *Liaison.* 20, *Gondola.* 22, *Wet blankets.* 23, *Gay.* 24, *Elegant.* 26, *Inertia.* 27, *Loser.* 28, *Penal code.*

Down. 1, *Blackmail.* 2, *Lobster.* 3, *First Consul.* 4, *Nearest.* 5, *Hanging.* 6, *Don.* 7, *Thermal.* 8, *Haydn.* 13, *Groundswell.* 16, *Ready-made.* 18, *Anthems.* 19, *Nonstop.* 20, *Grecian.* 21, *Ought to.* 22, *Wheel.* 25, *Air.*

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 10

Prize Crossword No. 10 will be found on page 144. For rules of entry, please see page 72.

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# HOME, SWEET HOME

**Men seyn that thre thynges dryven a man out of his hous, that is to seyn, smoke, droppyng of reyn, and wikked wyves**

GEOFFREY CHAUCER, *The Tale of Melibee*

I went up Into my uper Closett of an errant to fetch down six pound to pay Scerry the Mason for new Tileing part of the Hall blowne downe by the late Hurrycane & Wind; when Coming Downe the second paire of staires my Head was soe taken thatt I Fell from the topp allmost to the Bottom, neer Twenty high staires, which, as Itt stun'd me soe for a Time I were as Dead, till Mr. Freke (heering the Noise of my Fall & noe Complaintt) Made A shift to gett out of his Bed, who had nott bin outt of Itt in 6 weeks befor, In his shirt (Aboutt nine A clock in the Morning) knocked and Called Company to him & I were by Fowre Men taken up allmost Dead, & Laid on A Bed . . . The Voylence of this my Fall struck outt my Cheek Teeth thatt, strong as they weer, Fell outt of my Mouth—Roots and all—into my hand and brok outt my other Teeth.

MRS. ELIZABETH FREKE, *Diary, 24th July*, 1704

## *Self-service*

*Lord Finchley tried to mend the Electric Light*
*Himself. It struck him dead: And serve him right!*
*It is the business of the wealthy man*
*To give employment to the artisan.*

HILAIRE BELLOC, *Lord Finchley*

## *A Man About the House*

In the castle of which I am honorary baron we are in the middle of an orgy of "getting things done" . . . This door wants a new lock on it, that fireplace wants a brick taken out, the garden is in need of something else, somebody ought to inspect the cistern. What about the drains? There are a hundred things to be "done."

I have a method in these matters. When I observe that something wants doing, I say casually to the baroness, "We ought to do something about that fire-place," or whatever it is. I say it with the air of a man who knows exactly what to do, and would do it himself if he were not so infernally busy. The

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correct answer to this is, " Yes, I'll go and see about it today." Sometimes the baroness tries to put it on to me by saying, " We ought to do something about the cistern," but she has not quite got the casual tone necessary, and I have no difficulty in replying (with the air of a man who, etc.), " Yes, we ought." The proper answer to this is, " Very well, then. I'll go and see about it." In either case, as you will agree, action on the part of the baroness should follow.

Unfortunately it doesn't. She, it appears, is a partner in my weakness. We neither of us know how to get things done. It is a knowledge which one can never acquire. Either you are born with an instinct for the man round the corner who tests cisterns, or you are born without it, in which case you never, never find him.

A. A. MILNE, *If I May*

## *Pipe Dreams*

*Many people have asked me what was the most beautiful sight*
*I saw during the recent summer,*
*And I think the most beautiful sight was the day the water*
*wouldn't stop running and in came the plumber,*
*Because your cottage may be very cunning,*
*But you don't appreciate it when the water won't stop running,*
*And you would almost rather submit to burgling*
*Than to consistent gurgling.*
*And then the other most beautiful sight I saw during the summer*
*Was the day the water wouldn't run at all and in came the*
*plumber,*
*Because one thing even less enticing than a mess of pottage*
*Is a waterless cottage.*
*So apparently all my beautiful memories of the summer*
*Are beautiful memories of the plumber . . .*
*And that's the great advantage plumbers have over me and you,*
*They don't have to think about plumbers, so they can concentrate*
*on the view.*

OGDEN NASH, *The Face Is Familiar*

## *Spring Cleaning*

In ye afternoone I spent a deale of time in seekeinge ye same paper. My wife had readyed my studdy whilst I was out & it was gone. I sought it 2 or 3 houres & could not finde it.

THE REV. HENRY NEWCOME, *Diary, 16th April*, 1670

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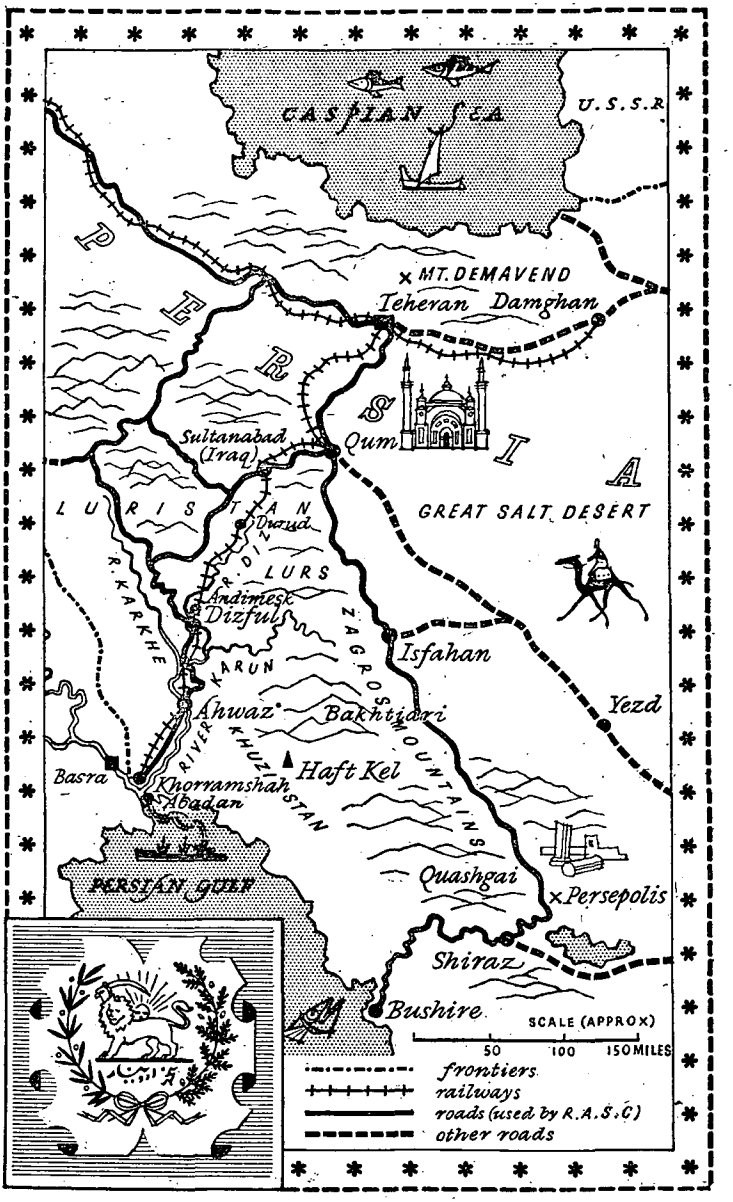


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# The Skull & The Sword

By CHRISTOPHER LANDON

*This is the story that Conway told me.*

*I think perhaps the strangest part is that he told it to me at all, for I did not know him well; it may have been a combination of his mood, the weather, and the news that let him talk like this to a comparative stranger on that wet Sunday afternoon. Conway had come up to my house for lunch before a round of golf. The April rain started as we drank our cocktail and by the time we had finished eating, it was a steady sodden downpour.*

*I installed him in a chair by the fire, with a brandy and a newspaper, while I went to finish a letter. There was a long silence before his explosive sound and the crackle of the paper thrown down. Conway got up and limped towards the window. I saw the headlines on the fallen page were about Persia.*

*"What do you make of it all?" I said. I remembered he had told me he was out there during the war.*

*He didn't seem to hear; he stood staring out into the rain. Then he said. "How green it is. It seemed the same out there—but I suppose it was the contrast—the gardens against the desert." He came back to the present quite suddenly. "I beg your pardon—what did you say?"*

*"I said what do you make of this Persian business?"*

*"Not much—" he laughed, "except that some things I wondered at once are now becoming very clear."*

*"Such as—?" He limped back to his chair. "Oh, I got involved in quite a party out there—I don't suppose it would matter much—talking about it now—" Afterwards, I tried to write it down just as he told me it happened.*

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## *THE FIRST PART OF ARGOSY'S NEW NOVEL*
### *(in Four Parts)*

IT was first light when I awoke.

The uniform grey of the desert was just starting its slow subtle change to the yellow and browns of the day; to the east the rising sun had touched the snow peaks of the mountains with flame. It was still cool in the Persian summer dawn, but already the breeze that ran before the sun's full force, was sighing round the scattered buildings and twisted whirls of dust and debris from the face of the plain. Brown hands parted the mosquito-net, and a mug of tea was pushed under my nose; the subdued voice of Kerim Shah, my boy, bade me good morning.

"Shaving water and uniform in five minutes," I said. "I'm taking first parade today." Kerim showed no surprise, though normally this was a junior officer's duty.

From my bed on the verandah, I watched the men coming to work. They came along a road which passed some twenty yards in front of the hut; singly or in groups, a shifting stream, some five hundred strong. Persians of every colour and size—from the pale bold features and mountaineer's stride of the tribesman from the hills, to the tall, black, shuffling Arab of the plain.

These were my command: not enlisted soldiers, but civilians employed by the British Government. They drove the trucks taking supplies to Russia, over the nine hundred miles from the Persian Gulf, through the mountains, to the shores of the Caspian Sea—five hundred scoundrels, whom I was supposed to control with six officers and sixty British other ranks.

Today there was a feeling of disquiet—almost apprehension.

I thought of yesterday and the days before; the little incidents of disobedience and impertinence to my officers and men; of the sullen way in which orders had been obeyed. They were normally a cheerful crew and, I believed, well treated. I was severe with them, yes, but I tried hard to be just; and justice was a thing that they valued greatly. For they could never hope to find it among their own people.

I thought of what might happen today—or some day very soon—when this tension snapped; the nearest help three hours off, perhaps five hundred in camp to make trouble, with potential reinforcements from the eighty thousand inhabitants of the neighbouring town of Ahwaz. It was the worst time of the year, too; the heat of the summer only half gone—the tempers of all getting higher, as physical resistance was lowered while we dragged ourselves through the last two months, waiting for the break of the Date Wind—soft and moist—from the Gulf.

But most important to me was Jean's last letter. I had been out in the Middle East since the beginning of the war. Four years is a long time to wait for two people who love each other—a thousand miles apart, with the clash of war in Africa and Europe between them. Memories and letters are all that you have to hold on to.

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She had been so good about writing—far better than I was. But her letters had changed gradually over the last six months. The words were still there and the thoughts the same; but the letters were shorter and, somehow, stilted. The reference to our "tomorrow" seldom appeared.

"I've got it coming to me," I thought. I was glad now that we had not married. It would be easier for me this way . . .

I slid out of bed and went into my room to dress. It was quite light now, and the camp could be seen clearly. Spread out over the dun Khuzistan plain, it was some four acres in extent, surrounded by a triple barbed-wire fence, fifteen feet high. In this area were dotted long low mud bungalows, which served as billets, offices, and stores. Away to the left were the lines of lorries in the vehicle park, and beyond them, the high shelters of the workshops.

Kerim Shah was in attendance while I dressed.

"Tell Captain Hope I want to see him at once," I said, as I started to shave.

A few moments later Jim Hope came in—tall, grey-haired, with fresh complexion and bright blue eyes; my Workshops Officer and very good friend. "Listen . . ." I said. He cocked his head on one side, looking, I thought, like a very intelligent stork.

"Trouble," he said. "That's what we have got, plenty trouble."

It was five minutes to the time that the lorries should be under way, but no sound came from the vehicle park. Instead of the usual slamming doors and starting motors, the crashing of gears and shouts, there was complete silence.

It was then that the first faint shiver ran up and down my spine.

I wiped the soap off my face.

"Why? How?" I asked, though I knew the answer.

"I don't know how, but I know why. Someone is stirring up discontent in the men. I think the roots are outside the camp, but it's been getting worse in Workshops for weeks. They are getting bloody rude and refusing to work overtime."

I made up my mind.

"We will have to have a showdown on this today. Go off now and get all the British into the office bungalow at once. And the interpreter—I think I can trust him. After that, go and have a look at Workshops: if anything starts, it will be there. But don't try and deal with it on your own. Come back to me at once."

I finished dressing, took down my revolver and belt from the wall, and made for the office.

I brushed my way through the group of officers and men that stood by the doorway, and went to my desk.

The Sergeant-Major was standing by my desk, waiting for me. On a chair in the corner slumped the vast figure of the Persian interpreter.

If it had been possible to see Mr. Ibrahim Shakir naked and cross-legged, I am sure he would have looked exactly like one of those china Buddhas. Enormously fat, with roll upon roll of flesh

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stuffed into his drill tunic till the buttons pulled and the seams burst, this mountain was topped by a sallow head, shaped like an inverted pear.

"Well?" I snapped at him.

In this moment of crisis, the quality, if not the quantity, of his usual English deserted him completely.

"Sir, sir," he gibbered, "we will be cut, castrated, and murdered in our beds. The men say so. They will do no work—steal the stores—loot the lorries—and then do us too. There have been meetings in the bazaar these two, three nights . . . Allah protect us all . . ." He slid from his chair to the floor and burst into tears.

"Get Brigade, C.S.M.," I said.

The Sergeant-Major picked up the receiver and started to crank the handle of the field telephone. One of the subalterns came in and saluted. "All ranks are here, sir, except Captain Hope and Sergeant Evans; they are still at Workshops."

I thought for a moment.

"Put half of them in the transport office and half in the armoury. The officers can come in here for the moment. Issue out all arms and ammunition; but don't load yet."

I looked across at the C.S.M. He had stopped cranking.

"Line dead, sir," he said.

I thought: If they try to seize the stores, and I don't stop them, I shall get a rocket as stores are my personal responsibility. Brigade will try that old lark of making me pay for them. If I resist with force, someone is bound to get hurt and, as they are civilians, there will be diplomatic trouble. That way, I shall get an even larger rocket. I am right up a well-known creek without a paddle.

Then I stopped being scared and got angry.

The silence outside was broken by a noise like swarming hornets; there was a shout, the thud of running feet, and then the door burst open. The pair from Workshops had arrived. Both covered in dust and panting, while the blood was slowly creeping down one side of Jim Hope's face from a gash over his eye.

He banged the door shut and leaned against it.

"Stones and bottles," he said.

That decided it. Bluff was the only thing to try; and that quickly, before they got completely out of hand.

"Take over here, Jim. Man all the windows and cover me while I go out to talk to these birds—I want the C.S.M. to come with me."

I looked across at him and he nodded; but the smile had left his face. I got up and unbuckled my revolver, leaving it on the desk. With reluctance, the Sergeant-Major put his tommy-gun down beside it. "We shan't need those," I said.

At the door I turned to Jim.

"Don't fire unless we go down—then give them one last chance over their heads. After that, it's up to you."

"See you at breakfast," I added—but I didn't feel very brave

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or hungry as the C.S.M. and I walked out together into the sunlight.

I suppose it was about a hundred yards to where the mob of Persians were milling about in the centre of the vehicle park, but it seemed about ten miles to me. As we walked slowly, side by side, I could feel the sweat trickling down the backs of my legs from under my shorts. Looking sideways, I got some comfort from the stocky figure and battered spud-Irish face of C.S.M. Murphy. He was a tough egg and first-rate at his job.

"What are we going to do, sir?" he said.

"I don't know yet, but stick close to me and whatever I do, repeat twice as fast and twice as hard."

I shifted my heavy signet-ring to the second finger of my left hand; as a form of knuckleduster, it might be handy.

We were on them now; the outer fringe were quiet and avoided our eyes—staring at the ground and shuffling their feet. Towards the middle, they were packed closer, shouting and clutching at our clothes as we passed. The very centre was a tight-jammed mass—from which came a sustained hysterical howl, rising each moment in volume.

Three or four, whom I had rather expected, were standing there, haranguing the crowd from upturned boxes. I elbowed my way close to one and, with a jerk, pulled him down from his perch. It was Reza, the blacksmith.

He stopped shouting, and slowly the noise around us died down. He stood still, hands still upraised, with streaks of spittle running down his hennaed beard. My fear had quite gone as I grabbed him by the front of his gown.

"What dost thou, Reza?" I asked at the top of my voice, in the contemptuous Persian second person singular. "What dost thou here? Get thee to thy work."

He pushed his face close to mine, and I noticed that his eyes were dull and the pupils enormous—hashish, I thought. Then through the stench of dirt, sweat, and garlic, a torrent of words beat about me. I caught but a few, but after "poor," "oppressor," and "strike," I had had enough.

"Egg of a pig," I shouted, getting a firmer grip on his gown, "thou shalt not strike—thou art dismissed—get thee from my camp." And with my free open hand, I smacked him hard on both cheeks. It sounded like two pistol shots—and a sharp sigh rose from the crowd; to be served thus in public was the final insult to a Persian.

Things happened very quickly after that. His hand slid inside his robe, but I did not wait for a knife to appear. I brought my knee up hard into the pit of his stomach and he folded like a jack-knife beside me. I heard a sound like the hard impact of two billiard balls: I saw, for a moment, Murphy, with a Persian in each hand, in the act of knocking their heads together. Then it all became a haze of hitting and swearing blindly at anyone that was near—a red rage, with no time to feel my own bleeding knuckles or think of the probable knife behind my back.

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Soon it was over; they wavered, broke and ran: like a flight of frightened starlings they wheeled away across the camp and out through the gate to the desert towards the town. Apart from bruises, torn clothing, and raw knuckles, the only damage to the victors was a slight knife scratch on the Sergeant-Major's arm.

"Thank you, Sergeant-Major, it seems to have worked."

He laughed, a little shakily. "It certainly has, sir."

I rose. "Close the gate and put a guard round the wire. When Shakir has recovered, send him down to the bazaar to announce that the whole bloody lot are dismissed. If any of them want their jobs back, they can come round and ask for them tonight at six. There will be no work today."

There was just enough energy left to manage a slow and, I hope, dignified walk to my room: there, in privacy, I was violently sick.

Late that evening, I was alone in the big office, writing my report for the Brigade Commander.

It was quiet there and strangely peaceful. Through the open door came faintly the sad tuneless song of the night-watchman.

*Sir, I have the honour to report that a serious incident, involving Persian civilians employed by the Unit, took place on the Camp Site at* 0530 *hours* 23 *May* 1943 . . .

As I followed my description, I realized how silly it all looked put down on paper. I knew what would happen to my letter: a snort from the Brigadier with some of his special sarcasm saved for the next time he came round on inspection; then he would pass the buck to Teheran, and in air-conditioned G.H.Q. the file would go from branch to branch, gathering humorous but unhelpful comments in various coloured inks. It would be a nuisance; no one would see the danger or the waste of hard work and good material.

A great black spider ran out across the papers on the desk and stopped in the middle of the pool of light to stare at me with pin-point eyes, then it scuttled off once more into the shelter of the darkness. "It's no use," I said after him, "nothing will be done; all this is just a waste of time." I wrote:

*Of the* 423 *Persians on the morning parade,* 415 *returned this evening and asked for re-engagement. After careful screening,* 22 *doubtful characters have been eliminated. This is no guarantee against further trouble, as it is my considered opinion that the root of the matter lies in work of paid agitators in the bazaar. Their work will become easier and their material more inflammable as heat of the summer drags on. I would request, therefore, that the most energetic action be taken at once by higher authority to stamp out this trouble at its source, before there is further delay to the running of the vehicles, or worse, the loss of W.D. stores and the lives of British personnel. I have the honour to be, Sir . . .*

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At this moment, the telephone bell rang sharply.

The field telephone was still useless. It was the other phone, the civilian line that had been installed with such speed and courteous ceremony by the Persians when we had taken over the camp. They had hoped for so much from their eavesdropping.

I went to the other desk and picked up the receiver there: behind the hiss and crackle of the line there was a background of music, so faint that I could not catch the tune—I could only be certain that it was western, not native music. Then over this, crystal-clear, yet utterly remote, a man's voice spoke in English.

"Major Conway, if you please," he said.

I can only try to describe the effect those five words had on me. It was as if a ghost hand had run up the back of my neck. The words were harmless enough, and the accent was perfect. It was the tone that froze me. I was listening to something evil. It was a sound that I would never forget.

The line hummed and crackled in that moment's pause; then: "Conway speaking," I said.

"Good evening, Major," the voice went on in the same even expressionless tone. "I have a message for you."

"Who from?" I said.

"Someone who has your well-being at heart. You are not welcome in Ahwaz, nor in the rest of Iran. Get away from here at once and out of the country as soon as possible—otherwise you will be very unhappy."

I had to force out the words. "There is nothing I should like better than to get to hell out of here," I said, "but can your thoughtful friends arrange it?"

"My friends are not joking, Major. They can arrange nothing, but they know that you can. Go sick, ask for a transfer, but go before you are sorry."

"I would like to know some more about your friends . . ." I began, but the voice broke in, each word like a cut.

"Call them the Friends of Iran, if you will. You have their message and there is no more to say. Good night."

The faint music was cut off with a sudden click.

I stood quite still for some time after I had replaced the receiver, trying to sort this thing out. I was sure it was from the town that the call had come; it must have been a local one. Then the background music suggested one of the larger tea-houses, but I knew at least nine of these *chaikhanas*.

I went back to the telephone. "Give me the Chief of Police," I said to the civilian operator. I knew better than to question him about the call.

Colonel Shahbahkti, head of the police force of the province, was typical of his class and breed. Cunning and ruthless, effeminate, cruel, his attitude towards the three occupying powers—whom he tried, with small success, to play off against each other—ran through every shade from strutting arrogance to fawning servility. His mood related exactly to what the representative of that power

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had, or could give, and Colonel Shahbahkti at that moment wanted.

Tonight he was at home, and very affable. We waded through the morass of Persian compliments; then I apologized for having given him trouble that morning with a small vanload of rioters; he assured me they would be kept in jail, without trial, " at my convenience."

We talked of the war, the weather, and his family. Then, at last, I managed to get somewhere near the point of the conversation.

" I rang you, Colonel, to ask if you could dine with us on Monday; the Sheik is coming and we might have a poker school afterwards."

He tittered back at me. " That will be so nice, Major, thank you very much; a game with you, Sheik Ahmed, and your officers, would be delightful."

" That's settled then," I said. " Now the other thing is, could you possibly trace a telephone call for me? "

" A telephone call? " The Colonel's voice held nothing but polite surprise.

" Yes; a man rang me up on this line about ten minutes ago to give me a message; then stupidly he rang off before telling me who the message was from, or giving me time to reply. Perhaps you could find out something and let me know so that I can contact him at once."

It was crude, horribly crude, but the best I could think up on the spur of the moment.

" What nationality was this man, would you say? "

I hesitated. " European, but though he spoke English very well, I do not think he was an Englishman."

Shahbahkti's voice bounced with confidence. " It is easy, my friend. I will ring you back in less than five minutes. Then I shall know all about this man. If necessary, I will send my police to tell him to ring you at once. Have no fear, it shall be done."

Then a change came into his voice. " It is really curious that you should be talking to me tonight," he said, " for I was thinking of you only this afternoon. I said to myself, ' Major Conway will help—he has plenty! ' "

" Plenty? "

" Blankets," said the Colonel—" Not for me," he added hastily, " but I had a sad letter from a poor uncle this morning; he is an old man."

" How many blankets would your uncle want, Colonel? " I longed for him to get on with the job, but dared not let abruptness give the slightest cause for offence.

" Oh, about a hundred," said Shahbahkti, airily. " My uncle has had too many wives; it is by reason of his large family that he is now so poor. But fifty will do if you have not enough for all."

I said: " Look, Colonel, while you are finding out where my man is, I'll go down to the stores and see what I can do. I'm sure we shall be able to help you a little."

" A thousand thanks. I will do as you say; it will only take a

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few minutes. Are you sure that you would not like this man brought down to your camp? It would be so easy."

"No, thanks, I would just like to know where he is."

"In a few moments, then," said Shahbahkti, "and my uncle would like *thick* blankets."

After he had rung off, I sat by the telephone waiting for his reply. I had no intention of going anywhere near the stores, as W.D. property was out of the question.

The Colonel's five minutes had lengthened into ten and still the phone did not ring. As I waited on, sitting on the edge of the desk, chain-smoking, I seemed to hear that voice repeating again and again: *Go sick, Major, get a transfer; but get out of Ahwaz and out of Iran.*

It was a full hour before I gave it up; I could not ring back, not only because of the loss of "face" it would entail, but each passing minute made it clearer that this silence was not a question of "can't" with Shahbahkti. The answer was "won't."

With his power and graft, his ear to every telephone and public place, the thing that I had asked him was a simple matter. Some reason, so important that it overrode the desire to clothe the results of his uncle's virility, had also made it imperative that he should not speak to me again on this subject. He would dine with us on Monday as arranged; but neither the blankets nor my question would ever be mentioned.

Outside it was hot and still, and the stars were so close that you felt you could pick them out of the sky. The night-watchman was still repeating his sad little song. As I crawled under my mosquito-net, there was great comfort in the hard, cold bulk of the Webley .45 that I always kept under my pillow.

With daylight and the ensuing routine, my self-confidence slowly returned.

It was only on the last day, at the very end of this time, that a few words and one look threw it all back at me with the violence of a blow in the face. It was on the night that Sheik Ahmed and Shahbahkti came to dinner.

There were six other guests; two American officers, two from the oil company, the second secretary, and the local bank manager. We did not give these large parties often; it was not fair to the pockets of the junior members of the mess. Just once in a while we tried to return hospitality in one lavish burst, and this was one of these occasions.

Shahbahkti, of course, arrived first: he was not one to miss a second of anything that was going free. Greased, scented, and dressed up like a Christmas tree, he was, from the top of his neck-stretching, high-braided collar to the tips of his too-pointed lacquered shoes, entirely bogus and repellent. It was a relief to be able to let go of his plump wet hand and turn to escort him round the waiting officers. Two of my captains stared in fascination at the galaxy of medals and orders that danced on his chest. As he

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passed on, one said something to the other out of the corner of his mouth; I caught one word and hoped sincerely that the Colonel had not done the same. I glared at the two, and when the introductions were over, went across to where they were in uproarious conference with the Americans, who had just come in.

"Look here," I said, "I know it's very funny, but I will not have bad manners. If you can't wait till he has gone, you will both leave the mess." They were up to their old round game of inventing unprintable titles and horrible citations for the feats of valour that had won Shahbahkti his orders.

It was with real joy that I saw Sheik Ahmed's car draw up outside the verandah. Probably Ahmed was unique; a man with two complete identities that never touched or intermingled. At the drop of a hat he could change completely from one to the other; in a second, Sheik Ahmed Abdul bin Ashar, lord of a thousand horse, with his slow calm thoughts and far-seeing desert eyes would be gone and in his place stood Mr. Ahmed, the European to the last detail—in dress, speech, mannerisms, and even tricks of thought.

Ahmed, aged seven, had been wrenched from his shepherd-boy friends and bundled hastily into an English prep. school, to be followed by Winchester and Balliol. He had hated it at first, but the weapon of his excellence at all games, and a certain innate wisdom that allowed him to seal off his real self and accept round this all the best that the West had to offer, had turned the experiment into a great success. Here running up the steps to meet me was the twentieth-century Moslem millionaire, faultless in black tie, soft shirt, and double-breasted dinner-jacket. But always just behind, I saw the other Ahmed, splendid in argal and kaftan, the feudal baron sitting like a rock on his stallion, as he waited to receive me when I went to his camp.

Soon we sat down to dine and from my place at the head of the long table, with Shahbahkti on my left and Ahmed on my right, it was good to look down the two lines of officers and guests. From near the far end came a sudden burst of laughter, and I knew that the terrible pair were up to their awful inventions again.

I was thinking of the letter in my tunic pocket, the one that had arrived by the mail truck before dinner and had been brought to me while I was changing as it had been marked MOST URGENT.

It was a G.H.Q. order—to hand over the Company to Jim Hope and to report to Teheran at once. I had not even had time to tell him before the guests had started to arrive.

So it would seem as if the Friends of Iran were going to get their wish—or at least the first part of it. And as I thought of them, half listening at the same time to Shahbahkti's unending sallies and Ahmed's almost monosyllabic answers passing across me, I remembered the last time I had heard the Colonel's voice in the darkness of my deserted office. Then the other voice that had preceded his; and that thought made me shiver.

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But it was not until dessert that I decided, as this was the last chance, to take an unfair advantage of a guest. We had been talking in a mixture of French and Persian; now I addressed Shahbahkti in English, a language he detested, but spoke well.

"I'm sorry you couldn't get me any information about that telephone call the other night," I said.

The Colonel was eating a peach. With great care he examined the slice that was impaled on his fork; then he leant forward to put it in his mouth. I heard his corsets creak.

"Ah, yes," he said, "that call. It was most remiss of me not to let you know, but actually, there was no information. The operator was a fool and a liar as well; not only had he no record of your call, but he denied that there had ever been one. He has, of course, been dismissed."

He cut himself another slice of fruit. "Then," he continued, "just as I was going to ring you back, the Governor wanted me, most urgently. One thing led to another, there is so much to watch, so much to do—I'm afraid it slipped from my memory Forgive me."

"How is your uncle?" I countered.

"Well, thank you, Major, and happy about his future: I was fortunate in being able to do him a small service through the generosity of one of your allies."

"It was kind of you to take so much trouble," I said. "It's all very annoying because I want to send a reply, and, of course, I can't."

"Have you no clue to your friend?" said the Colonel, politely.

"None, as to his name and whereabouts; all that I know is that he is a Friend of Iran."

If Shahbahkti was ready, Ahmed was not; at these words his head came up with a jerk. In the same instant, I saw the bloated purple lids fly back from the Colonel's eyeballs and a message blaze across the table to his fellow-countryman. It was instantaneous, but the import could not have been clearer.

I knew now, and there was no point in trying to probe any deeper. With a glance down the table, I caught the vice-president's eye and rapped for the loyal toast. Soon after, we formed our usual poker school, but it was an uncomfortable game.

I was almost glad when Ahmed looked at his watch and said he must be going. As I walked down the steps of the verandah beside him, the two white forms of his bodyguard slipped out of the shadows and fell in quietly behind us. For a moment the light from the open door at our backs caught the silver sheaths of their daggers and gleamed on the long black barrels of their slung rifles. Ahmed slipped his arm through mine as we walked across the sand towards the car.

When his words came they were casual, affectionate, and I knew that they were being chosen with great care.

"You look awful, Bill; just about all in. Why don't you have some leave, or put in for a posting to the mountains?"

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"I'm all right," I said.

"You're not—you've served one summer here already and that is enough for anyone. This place can be very—unhealthy if you stay too long. Please do something about it."

"I can't, but someone else has," I said. "I've got orders to hand over to Jim and go to Teheran at once. The letter only arrived just before dinner, and I haven't told any of them yet."

"Oh, that's good." Then almost anxiously: "Do you think it will be for long?"

"A week or so, otherwise they would not have bothered to tell me to hand over the Company."

We had reached the car; Ahmed opened the door and slid under the steering-wheel. The bodyguard piled in, one beside him and one behind his back.

"Well, so long, Ahmed, and thanks for everything. I shall miss you."

His hand came through the window and gripped my arm hard. "Good-bye, Bill; don't forget us, but don't come back too soon."

The big black Cadillac shot forward, and I watched the white pencils of headlight stab down the road towards the gate and the barbed wire. Outside they turned south and dwindled to one glowing point on the black face of the desert. Back in the mess, Shahbahkti was stamping and clapping his hands, screaming for his car.

When all the guests had gone, I told Jim Hope and the others of what was in store for me.

"When do you want to go, sir?" said Jim.

"Tomorrow," I said firmly. "There is no point in hanging about. If you are not too tired I'll hand over the secret files in the safe and the money now. There isn't much of it."

It did not take long, and after we had finished I started to clear up my desk. There was a pile of mail that had been left there from before dinner. I pushed this to one side: it was Jim's worry now in the morning. Underneath there had been hidden one personal letter. It now lay uncovered on the pink blotter, small and forlorn. I picked it up: it was from Jean. But as I turned it over I knew there was really no need to open it. The envelope was so thin there could be no more than one page inside. With only one page, I knew the message it would contain.

The straight black ribbon of the empty road stretched ahead to where the mirage danced and floated. The tarmac surface, semi-liquid in the afternoon sun, sucked and sloshed at the treads of the tyres as my truck went forward at a steady forty. I was determined to be in the comparative cool of the foothills—a hundred miles away—before it was dark. It was very hot. There was no relief from the wind that rushed through the cab; it was like the blast from an oven door.

Bezard Ali sat still in the driver's seat, holding the wheel lightly, and stared straight ahead in silence.

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I looked at his proud, bold-featured profile—and thought again how lucky I had been to find him. Short and slight, his complexion no darker than mine and his hair so black that it showed a bluish sheen. Bezard was a tribesman—a Quashgai. He came from this fighting stock of the mountains far to the south. Mustering 50,000 rifles, the tribe were utterly contemptuous of the central government, and held undisputed rule over their extensive territory.

One day Bezard had appeared in my camp. He was the sort of material that we were looking for—a good mechanic, a first-class shot, and had a fair command of English.

At the interview, he had stated his case, quite simply: "I will not work with these bloody Persians, but I will work for you." I had taken an instant liking to him, made him my own driver, and had never regretted it.

His attitude toward his fellow-countrymen was very simple. There was his own tribe—where every man was a brother; the other big tribes from the north—the Lurs and Bakhtiari—were his social equals, but natural enemies; the rest, the government, the townsfolk and the plainsmen were all lumped together as "bloody Persians."

Bezard had proved to be a loyal and competent servant in his simple proud way; then came the incident of the pig.

One day, we had gone out hunting in the marshes of the River Karun, and, from the truck, I had shot and wounded an old boar. It had made off to a patch of scrub and Bezard had gone on foot to finish it off. Most dangerous of all wounded animals, the boar had lain in the thicket while its life ebbed away, waiting for a last chance to attack.

At five yards' range, it came out at Bezard like a bullet; there was no chance for him to fire before he was down under half a ton of fury—the razor tusks slashing.

I made the best shot of my life from that truck; almost from the hip, I managed to miss Bezard and got the pig right through the heart. But the Persian was in a bad way when I dragged him clear. His thigh was gashed from hip to knee and by the time I got him to the hospital, he had nearly gone. Blood was urgently needed for a transfusion; I was handy and, by a lucky chance, of the same blood group.

When he came out of hospital, Bezard had limped into my office and had given me a silver signet-ring. On it our two names were entwined in Persian script—it was the one that I had used as a knuckleduster only a week before.

As he gave it to me, Bezard had said, simply: "You saved my life and gave me your blood—we are brothers."

From that moment he behaved as if we really were.

I looked about me. Everywhere the dead, dun desert was mottled with darker patches of tinder-dry camel-thorn. Parallel with the road and a few hundred yards from it, another dark line—with occasional patches of dirty green—showed the course of the Karun River.

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Away ahead a mound, topped by buildings and a spire that always reminded me of an ice-cream cone, was beginning to come up from over the horizon. This was Daniel's tomb at Shush and we were nearing the halfway mark to the hills. There was nothing more to look at, so tilting my topi over my eyes, I leaned back thinking.

Teheran had told me to hand over my command and report there immediately for interview, but nothing more. This was the only ripple that had returned from the stone I had thrown on the placid face of the Administrative pond a week before.

Jean's letter said exactly what I had expected.

*I cannot go on this way any longer. I have loved you, darling, but you have got so faint and far-away and the war looks as if it will go on for ever. Now I have met someone who I know loves me. He wants us to marry very soon. Try to forgive and understand, and know that some part of me will love and remember you always . . .*

Well, there it was; my first feelings had been those of intense relief. It was easier to know than to go on waiting for the axe to fall.

Bezard broke into my reverie. "Vehicles, sahib." He pointed ahead along the road.

The mirage was like a shining lake into which the road disappeared. Now on it were two columns—one black, one brown; at one moment short and thick, they would suddenly shoot up tall and thin, dancing and swaying together. These were the distorted shapes of vehicles—the first we had seen for over an hour.

There was nothing else to do, so I watched them.

Slowly the columns moved together again; then the black one spun away and disappeared out of sight. In a few minutes, the mirage, keeping pace with us, had moved on; then I saw one truck, the same make as mine, parked on the edge of the desert by the side of the road. Nothing else was in sight. We passed by and I gave it no more than a casual glance; it must have taken a few seconds and a hundred yards' travel for my mind to register that there was something very odd about the vehicle.

I said to Bezard: "Turn round and go back to that truck."

As we coasted back, I saw that my fleeting impression had been right. It looked as if it had been hit by a tornado. The bonnet was off and was lying on the ground beside it. The headlamp glasses had been removed and the reflectors were hanging out on their wires; both doors were open, with the inside panels ripped off; the seat covers torn up, with springs and stuffing scattered everywhere; strangest of all—a long gash had been torn down the side of the petrol tank, and from this a trickle of spirit was still draining into the sand. There was no sign of an occupant—no sound save the cracks from the two cooling engines. We got out and walked over, and Bezard went round to the far side. Then he called sharply: "Sahib, quickly." I ran round to join him.

On the sand, face down, was the body of a man, stark naked.

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I rolled him over. He was young, with high cheekbones and slant eyes, and he had a mouthful of teeth of aluminium or some metal. There was a trickle of blood showing from a cut on his fair head—but this was not the primary cause of his condition: heat-stroke, unprotected as he was from this pitiless sun, had got him badly.

We put his dead body in the back of the truck and fixed up a tow-rope; an attempt had been made to slash the tyres, but as they were the thick "run-flats" this had not been very successful, and the vehicle would move.

Before we left, I searched the ground thoroughly; apart from our tyre tracks, there were two other sets. One, with the tread-marks of the wrecked truck, showed where it had pulled off the road from the south, the direction in which we had come. The other, smaller and narrower, came from the north and then circled back towards the way from which they began. There were a lot of footmarks all over the place, but I did not pay much attention to them—I was looking for something else, something far more important. Bezard put my thoughts into words: "Sahib, where are his clothes?" he said.

We searched the desert for a good half-mile in each direction, but did not find a single garment.

It was beginning to cool off by six o'clock when we pulled up outside the American camp at Andimesk. This shanty town at the edge of the foothills was one of the main American marshalling yards, and headquarters for the troops who worked the Trans-Iranian railway.

Apart from the G.I. on duty at the shelter by the gate of the compound, there was no one to be seen. I sat at the wheel of the wrecked truck, which Bezard was towing, and called him over.

"Is Captain Jefferson in?"

"Yeah, I guess so, Major."

"See any civilian vehicle go that way?" I gestured towards the hills. I was thinking of the black part of the mirage—though it distorts shapes, colours are always true. Being black, it could not have been an army vehicle.

"Only one, a black sedan, going fast, about an hour back."

"See who was in it?"

The guard was getting bored by this conversation. "Didn't look—wasn't interested."

I said: "Thanks. I'll drive this lot right in to the captain." Joe Jefferson, late sheriff of Abeline County, Texas, and now a captain of the U.S. Army, commanded this section of the Railway Operating Battalion. He was an old friend of mine.

At this moment, he was sitting in his office dressed only in a towel and with his feet in a bucket of water. Even censoring mail he looked as tough as his civilian job suggested.

"Hullo there, Bill," he said, as he swept the letters to one side and removed his feet from the bucket. "What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

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"On my way to Teheran—I meant to get further, but we had a delay. Can I stay the night?"

"Sure. Tell your boy to put your things in my room—there's a spare bunk."

He dried his feet and put on some sandals. "Now come over and have a drink."

"I certainly need one."

Then we went out on to the verandah and he saw my prize. I put my hand on his arm: "I'll tell you all about it when I've had that drink. But first, can you get it under cover before the whole camp wakes up and sees it?"

He nodded. "That shed over there; I'll get you the key."

He went back for the key and then walked round the truck in silence; he could not see inside as the cover had been lashed down at the back. Having completed his circuit, he gave a low whistle.

"It's much better than that," I said with nonchalance. "There's a body inside."

After the drink, I told him all that had happened; then we went to the shed and examined the truck all over again, together. We could find nothing new.

Back in his room, I said: "The oddest thing is the clothes—they can't have just dematerialized—where have they gone and why were they taken?"

Joe leaned back in his chair. "What do you make of it?" he said.

We were on those terms of friendship that allowed some rudeness.

"I should be asking you—you were a form of bastard policeman once. But, since the mountain comes to Mahomet, this is my idea. First, the tracks—the truck was going the same way as I and pulled off the road by accident or appointment, when the black part of the mirage—possibly the sedan your guard saw returning—arrived from the opposite direction.

"Then, the damage—it can't be ordinary sabotage. By the extent of the damage, something must have been well hidden and very important. When I first saw the petrol tank, I thought that it might be opium—they hide it in the tanks in sealed tubes between Palestine and Egypt. But it couldn't be that here, because opium is cheap and legal.

"Finally, the truck is a standard British type—you don't use them, so it must be one of ours or the Russians. The last would fit in with the body—I have only seen those white metal teeth on a Russki, and apart from that, he has the build of a Slav.

"The possibilities are, then, that a Russian, driving north, purpose and destination unknown, is stopped by a black car, the occupants of which proceed to sap him on the head—"

"Why do you say occupants?" Joe asked.

"Because, by the number of footprints there, one man would have had to be running up and down all day to make them.

"Having sapped him," I continued, "they search the truck and strip off his clothes for the same purpose. Then I appear,

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unexpected like, so they have to beetle off in a hurry, taking his clothes and leaving him exposed in the sun—nice types."

I stopped, rather pleased with this effort.

"Who are they?" said Joe.

I shrugged my shoulders.

He said: "They must have been surprised to see you—how were they to know that only mad dogs and Bill Conway go about on a Persian summer afternoon?" Then: "What do you think they expected to find?" Like me, he was thinking in the plural.

"Papers of some kind," I said hopefully.

He laughed. "You Limeys always go for the cloak-and-dagger stuff in a big way."

There was a pause. "Well, what are you going to do about it?" he said.

"My only interest is if the body is British—which appears to be very unlikely. But it is a police matter to sort it out, so I shall hand the whole thing over to our M.P.'s. Can I phone them from here?"

He stood up and looked down at me.

"Before you do that, I think it would be a good thing if we went a little further."

"O.K., copper, but why and how?"

"It all seems so screwy to me—do you mind if I get our doc to have a look at him? He might be able to tell us more about how he died. Anyway, it would be doing the poor bastard a favour to give him the chance to do an autopsy."

"O.K.," I said, "as long as he will do it tonight."

It was late when I left the mess for Joe's room. He had gone off at the same time to make the last rounds of his camp. As I walked across the compound, the camp generator was chugging softly in the distance, and it was warm and still under the stars. I was on my way, with the key of the shed and a torch in my pocket, to have one last look at my find. I had made my report and the Military Police were coming to collect the lot in the morning.

I opened the door of the shed and ran the beam of the torch slowly over the body of the truck. I got into the driving seat, and sat holding the wheel, idly pressing the pedals. Something about it was worrying me—something my senses had noted subconsciously when I had been steering this afternoon. It was nagging at my mind, and I was determined to stay there until I had found out what it was.

It took me some time; but then I got it. It was not something that I had seen, but something I had felt.

Getting out, I bent towards the floorboards and shone the torch on the pedals. They were of the ordinary metal type, covered with rubber pads. I pressed them down and then saw what this "thing" was. The clutch and accelerator were quite solid, but between the rubber and metal of the brake there was the slightest possible "give."

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With a knife, the pad came off quite easily; inside it was a flimsy sheet of paper, folded many times. I smoothed it out; typewritten, in short paragraphs, it was, as far as I could make out, in Russian.

I was in bed before Joe returned.

"Doc just phoned," he said as he came in. "It was heat-stroke, but he had been smacked over the head hard enough to fracture his skull. That would have stopped him talking for some time, anyway."

He sat on his bunk and kicked off his boots. "There was nothing in his stomach, either," he added.

"Cloak-and-dagger stuff to you," I said as I turned over. "What do you think he had done—swallowed the secret plans? Good night, and thanks for everything—I'll have to be off at dawn."

But I did not tell him what I had found.

Before first light we were packed and ready to move off.

Full day, with its accompanying heat, came even more quickly here than on the plain. By the time we had covered the length of the single street to the military checkpost, the sun, that had been building up its power against the dam of the eastern flank of the mountains, had spilled from the top and hurled itself in sudden light and vicious heat against the tortured sea of foothills. In seconds, it was clear day—and HOT. As the road, white gravel now, writhed and twisted in front of us through this sea of petrified rock, there was nothing moving or alive save our truck and the plume of white dust stretching away behind us, no sound but the hiss of our tyres and the lovely noise of a well-found engine running at full power. With luck our race between altitude and sun would be won today without any discomfort.

Bezard and I seldom spoke; we had an old-fashioned routine for this long-distance driving. Each took the wheel for alternate hours and tried to see the maximum mileage we could show in the period.

Hour after hour the white ribbon unwound before us; the country greener, the air softer. It was near lunch-time when we met with our accident.

By then we might have been in the Highlands of Scotland. Bezard was driving once more as we ran along above the banks of a fast-running river. On our left was a straight, black cliff, perhaps five hundred feet high, which rose sheer from the edge of the road. I opened the trap in the cab roof and tried to peer up at the fabulous carvings that had been hewn out of this rock of Bisitun. But we were too close here to see them properly, and then I saw on the map that only a short way ahead the road swung sharp right to cross the river by bridge and then turned left to run along the farther bank. There would be a good view from there, through the glasses, of the great bearded king, with the rows of chained captives kneeling before him, of all his courtiers, his soldiers, and his

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animals. And with this the carved message that had stared out in its horrible simplicity across the green valley for over two thousand years:

I am Darius, King of Kings. All the rulers of the world came against me and I conquered them. Some I killed. Some I blinded. Some I led into captivity.

I said to Bezard: "When you are over the bridge"—and I pointed to where it was just coming into view—"pull off the road and we will have a brew up."

He nodded and I gave one of my occasional automatic glances in the driving mirror on my side. In a truck with right-hand drive, this helped the driver to compete with overtaking traffic. Now in the glass face I saw the foreshortened back of the truck and our cloud of dust, streaming away behind; but over on the left-hand side of the road, avoiding our wake, was a black saloon car, a few lengths behind. It must have come up fast as there had been nothing in sight when I had looked only a few minutes before. I waved it on. "There's a car passing you, Bezard," I said.

He pulled over to his own side and slowed down slightly; the black car made no effort to come by, but kept the same position and distance behind us. We were getting close to the turn of the bridge now, and I said: "They will have to wait." We picked up speed and went into the curve; then Bezard changed down to get the power for the short steep ascent to the centre.

As well as being so sharply arched, these bridges tapered in width towards the point of the keystone. We were halfway up the slope when, above the noise of our own movement, I heard a sudden snarl.

As I looked out, the bonnet of the black car was level with my seat, sliding forward beside us as the driver accelerated. One look up the tapering rise, hemmed in by parapets, showed that there was little chance for us to make the crest together.

"Look out!" I shouted. "The bloody fool is trying to pass us." Then I yelled Persian obscenities at the windows that were now beside me. The only reaction was that the black car swung over and rammed us.

I felt the shock and falter of the truck towards the parapet; but Bezard was ready. He put his foot down hard and locked over towards them.

There was a screech of tearing metal and a splintering of wood; jammed together, the two vehicles hit and hung poised in the narrow apex of the bridge. The whole thing was a matter of seconds; but during that time, leaning out, still shouting, I was looking straight into the back window of the car. Very close behind the glass on my side, staring at me, was a face.

The thing I shall always remember was the complete lack of expression. I would have expected the feelings of anger and fear that I must be showing to be in some way reflected. But there was nothing—not even interest. Then the details were printed on my mind.



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The face was very white, with a broad, domed forehead and winged cheekbones; below this, it sucked in to a small square jaw, the mouth a straight line. I did not get any impression of neck and shoulders, the head seemed disembodied, floating. Round tinted glasses heightened the impression of hollow sockets and I thought at once of a medical-student friend of long ago and the skull he always kept on his sitting-room mantelpiece.

Then the second was over; by a chance in a thousand, we were through and still on the bridge. We plunged down on the far side and the face disappeared as the black car drew clear and accelerated.

Blinded by its dust, we bumped off the road to a standstill. A chase would have been futile and we both knew it. Bezard Ali jumped from the truck and wrenched the rifle from its clip; with one longing glance at the black speck at the head of its white trail far away in front of us, he let the butt slide to the ground. The range was already over two thousand yards. "It's a waste of a good bullet," I said.

We walked back to the top of the bridge and looked at the damage. On our side there was a great furrow cut in the stone of the parapet. The whole fabric had been pushed outwards, and two of the smaller stones had gone. I looked over to where the river plunged and foamed among the black boulders, thirty feet below.

"You did well, Bezard," I said.

He shook his head. "Not well, sahib. I should have pushed that—ordure cart over to hell and damnation." There was a pause. "These bloody Persians," he said.

"Well," I answered, "I didn't see the driver, but I'll certainly recognize his passenger again. I had a good look at him and it was a face I shan't forget in a hurry. If we do meet, I'll give him a lesson in road manners he won't forget."

We looked at the other side of the bridge where there were some smears of black paint, and in the road a few fragments of ripped metal; the truck was splintered and scratched, a cleat ripped off and the sheet torn, but otherwise in good order. We had our meal and then pushed on fast to try and make up for the lost time.

At the next town, Bezard looked at me as we passed the police barracks. "Do you want to report those people?" he asked.

"If we stopped to report every bit of bad driving that we met on this road, we wouldn't be in Teheran by Christmas," I said. "No, keep going, I want to get there tonight."

So we kept on to Sultanabad; past the holy mosque of Qum, with the setting sun flaming on its gold-plated dome. Then the last weary eighty miles to where the lights of Teheran twinkled row upon row on the rising slope of the foothills. Behind them rose the perfect cone of Mount Demavand, its perpetual snow-cap shining faintly in the starlight.

It was after ten when we drove up to the Demavand Hotel. The clerk at the reception desk was strange to me and at first unhelpful. He frowned down at the pages of his register. "I'm

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sorry, sir, but we are full up." He ran his finger up and down the list in a futile and irritating manner. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't, but it's Conway."

"Oh, that is all right, then." He swung the register round for me to sign. "A room was booked for you this afternoon."

"Booked? By whom?" G.H.Q. did not usually bother themselves with the comfort of country majors.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know, but here are the instructions. Number 12, one of the best, a double with bathroom, to be kept for a Major Conway, arriving some time tonight."

I was too tired to care who had ordered it, or that the cost would probably exceed the amount that I was allowed by the army. I thought I might even risk a bath, though I knew that the water was piped direct from the street outside. The plumbing was the most modern, but you would wash in a faint aroma of boiled rotten cabbage; then perhaps an old stalk or some other nameless horror would come floating to the surface beside you.

We were halfway up the first leg of the stairs when the clerk called after me: "A note arrived for you about an hour ago, sir. It has been sent up to your room."

Number 12 was large and comfortable; it had french windows that led on to a balcony overlooking the main street. Bezard dropped my bag in the middle of the carpet and then went on a tour of inspection. He went to the bathroom and turned all the taps on, then to the toilet where he pulled the plug. He stood quite still, silently watching these functions of modern science; only on his face there was an expression of curious contempt.

A plain white envelope was propped against the mirror of the dressing-table. I picked it up and saw the thin angular Continental writing, unknown to me: "Major Conway, R.A.S.C." was all that it said.

"What of the truck, Bezard?" I said, as I ripped the envelope open. He came out of the bathroom. "I shall put it in the garage now and then I shall sleep in it. These Teheranis . . ."

The sentence trailed off, but I hardly heard him. I was looking at the square stiff card that was in my hands. On it, block-printed, was the emblem of Persia, the lion, with the sword, backed by the rising sun. There was one difference from the standard crest; instead of the curved sword being held upright, it was bent back through another forty-five degrees so that the blade was horizontal. It showed the end of a back swing before a vicious cut. Beneath this was one sentence in the writing of the envelope.

*With the compliments of the Friends of Iran.*

I stared at it with my mouth open, that horrible sick surge rising from the pit of my stomach. It was all back with me again; that voice, Shahbahkti's blazing eyes, and Ahmed's hesitant sentences.

Bezard was looking over my shoulder at the card; he did not speak, but I saw the skin of his cheeks move as his jaw muscles tightened.

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"So you know something, too," I thought.

Then he picked up the end of his last sentence as if there had been no break. "Perhaps I shall bribe a man to watch the truck and then I shall come back here," he said.

After he had slipped out of the door, I locked it and bolted the french windows on the inside. Then I started to turn that room upside down. I turned over the carpet, stripped the bed, and dismantled the chairs and the rest of the furniture. There was not a thing to be found; perhaps the worst part was that I did not know what I was looking for.

Then, I waited, miserable, in a corner away from the windows, till a tap on the door and a low voice announced Bezard's return. In his hand was his bed-roll, the oblong bundle that contained all his possessions.

He said: "With permission, sahib, I shall sleep by the door."

He laid out his bedding across the threshold and put his rifle down beside it. We undressed in silence, and then I got into the big bed. It was no use asking any questions. I knew that in his own time, if possible, he would tell me all that he knew. For a long time I listened to his slow easy breathing, and it was very comforting; then, at last, I fell into a wretched, broken sleep.

With the visiting-card of the Friends of Iran added to my collection of papers, I set out in the morning to report to the R.A.S.C. headquarters of G.H.Q., Teheran.

I kicked my heels in the Adjutant's office while he first staved off my questions and at last worked up enough energy to telephone through to the Brigadier. Yes, they had had my report of last week. No, there had been no special comment on it from anyone as far as he knew; he was not sure if the old man wanted to see me, but he would inquire.

"Well, someone must want to see me," I said irritably, as I threw the posting order on his desk. "Or have I come five hundred miles for nothing? You should know because it's got your reference number on it."

"Oh, has it?" he said, then picked up the telephone. "Major Conway is here, sir, do you want to see him? Yes, all right, I'll tell him. Room 43 at 11 o'clock. Thank you, sir."

He wrote something on a slip of paper and pushed it across to me.

"The Brigadier doesn't want to see you. He told me to say that he is very sorry he can't invite you to dine, but he is booked up solid for the next four nights. You are to report to this room at the time stated and take further orders from there."

I looked at the short message: "Room 43, G.H.Q. 1100 hours," was all it said.

"And who might be in Room 43?" I asked.

The Adjutant pulled a file towards him. "I haven't an idea; forgive me, but I've got the hell of a lot here to get through." He started writing. Even my own lot did not seem to want me.

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G.H.Q. was housed in a large modern hotel, and I wasted the twenty minutes before my interview in walking up and down the long white corridors, looking at the titles on the various doors. It was an amusing game. The gem was D.A.D.P.S.(P). I smiled, as I thought of what might go on in that room. I could see the captain, crouched, sombre at his desk, brooding on the awful responsibilities of the Deputy Assistant Director of Postal Services (Pigeons), or standing at the open window, with hand outstretched like Noah, waiting for the return of a vital message, while the reserve battalions cooed and fluttered in their cages on the walls.

Room 43 had no name-plate, no titles; below the number was pinned a card, slightly crooked; on it were the simple instructions: *Knock and enter.*

I did so.

It must have been one of the larger suites in the hotel. I was in a vestibule, a bathroom and toilet opening from one side of it. Ahead there was one room, beyond it a closed door. This first room was bare, save for a safe, a filing cabinet and two plain wooden tables opposite each other. At one, surrounded by files, a Sergeant was sitting, picking his teeth with a pen-nib; at the other, a pretty red-head was pounding a typewriter. She had freckles, blue eyes, and a delightful nose. The Sergeant got up and the red-head stopped her clatter for long enough to smile at me. I felt a little better.

I told the Sergeant my name and business; he went into the further room, taking my identity card and closing the door behind him. In a moment he reappeared and held the door open.

" Colonel Mackenzie will see you now, sir," he said.

I walked past him into the inner room.

This was larger, but still sparsely furnished. One wall was covered with a large-scale map of Persia, dotted with coloured pins; a good Tabriz carpet covered the floor. At the desk, set at an angle to the window, sat a Lieutenant-Colonel. He was a little man, with a thin humorous face, sandy hair, bushy eyebrows, and very pale blue eyes; on his bush-jacket were the ribbons of the D.S.O. and M.C., and stuck in the corner of his mouth was an ancient, filthy pipe.

He jumped up and shot out his hand.

" Good morning, Conway, take a chair."

I sat down and waited. The Colonel sucked at his pipe, which was obviously out, pulled out some matches, and relit it; then he picked up a file from his desk and turned over the pages. I noticed that his fingers were stained almost black with nicotine, his eyes were never still and all his movements, like his speech, were sharp and jerky.

" William Robert Conway," he read, " aged 32, educated at Marlborough and then employed by Fenn and Adams, Tea Brokers, Mincing Lane. Enlisted as Driver, R.A.S.C., 2nd September 1939. Sergeant, December 1939. Commissioned, April 1940. Service: France, Western Desert, Syria, Iraq, Persia. Mentioned

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in Dispatches, 15/6/41. Unmarried. Languages: Persian, fluent; French and Arabic, fair. First-class shot. Judo expert."

He shot a glance over the top of the file. "Correct?"

"All except the end bit, sir," I said. "My Persian is fair, but my French and Arabic are practically nil. I do hold a black belt in judo, but only of the first Dan."

He nodded. "The shooting—rifle and revolver?"

"I was in my school eight and I have always kept it up; my uncle was revolver champion of the Navy, and he taught me a lot."

"Dependants?"

I thought of Jean's letter in my pocket. "Father and mother are both dead—no, sir."

He turned, flicked over the page. "Nothing known—except a rather unfortunate visit to Yezd last year, town strictly out of bounds, of course."

I stared at the carpet, appalled; I thought I had managed to keep this quiet.

"Smoke?" he said, and pushed a cigarette-box across the desk towards me. In self-defence against the fumes that were drifting round me, I shook my head and pulled out my own pipe. He clapped his pocket and then threw a bright blue packet down beside the cigarettes. "Try that," he said.

I had one look at the black villainous stuff. "I can only stomach boys' tobacco, thank you, sir." I pulled out my own pouch, and the rattle of questions went on.

"Your job—you've been a success, but do you like it?" came next.

This was the first chance I had had to talk to anyone who really understood. I let off steam for some minutes on the impossibility of trying to run a native civilian unit on normal army lines—which is what I was supposed to do. I told him the full details of the trouble last week, and my fears of its return before the end of the summer and the Fast of Ramadan. But still I was wondering what the hell I was here for.

He said: "Yes, almost impossible, but the stuff must go through to Russia. There aren't enough troops—British or Indian—to spare to cope with it. I read your report—the General is very pleased. Now, what do you think started it?"

"Heat, hashish, and some trouble-making in the bazaar."

"There's a lot more of the last than you think," he said, "and I am trying to find out who is responsible—so far without much success."

Then he jumped to his feet and walked over to the big wall map. "Show me the areas in which your Company is now operating," he said.

As I traced the routes which we were now using, he asked an occasional question, but all the time I had the feeling that his mind was searching and turning on a plane away above this commonplace stuff. Like his hands and eyes that were never still, the brain was awake and agile. He fiddled with his pipe, which

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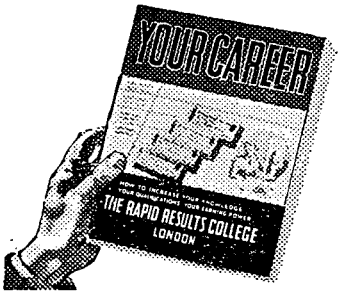


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was always going out, he struck countless matches and threw the burnt ends everywhere, and these mannerisms were irritating, almost infuriating. But I knew that behind them there was a great deal, and that for one of the few times in my life, I had met a man; I knew also why I had been sent for, and I made up my mind, if I were asked a question, as to what the answer would be.

I pointed out the routes from Bushire to the north, through Shiraz, to Isfahan and Teheran; then, skirting the west shore of the Caspian Sea, to Tabriz and the Russian border. From the Gulf ports, through Ahwaz and Kermanshah, to join the first route just north of Teheran. Last, south-east from Ahwaz, those that served the garrisons guarding the line of oil wells along the foothills, Haft Kel, Masjed-i-Soulimain, Agha Jari, and Gach Seeran.

The Colonel went over to the window and looked out into the garden. He said, almost to himself: "In fact, you can go anywhere in the country west of the line Shiraz–Teheran, in uniform, without any comment."

He swung round. "Would you like to work for me?" he said.

I was ready and waiting. "Very much, sir," I answered, "if you think I shall be any good; but I haven't any experience of—" I stopped, wondering if I had gone too far.

"Go on, Intelligence is the word you were going to use." Then he laughed: "You should have guessed by now. Yes, I am the kingpin of the 'I' branch in this command, God help me."

He went back to his desk and sat down, sucking furiously, then showered matches in every direction. "Before you finally make up your mind—and I'll only have a volunteer, no question of being detailed—before you do that, we must have a talk. So let's get some peace and quiet first."

He looked at the match-box, now empty, in his hand, and then started feverishly searching the top of his desk. Then he turned to the desk microphone beside him. His hand hung poised for a moment before he stabbed at the row of buttons.

"I can never work this bloody thing," he said. "I'm always getting the wrong people."

Then there was a click and a girl's voice answered: "Yes, sir?"

"Come in here, Tania," said Mackenzie.

The door opened and the red-head came in; she was prettier than I had thought. She walked up to the desk and stood, with her hands behind her back, looking down at the little man.

"Tania," said the Colonel, "where are my matches?"

Without a word she brought one hand forward and laid a box in front of him. Then she picked up the ashtray and emptied the wreckage into the waste-paper basket; bending down, she began to collect some of the more noticeable bits of jetsam on the carpet.

"Tania," said Mackenzie, "this is Major Conway who, I hope, is joining us. Tania is my secretary," he said to me. "She is a Pole, and we can't pronounce her surname."

I got up and shook hands. Hers were cool, and her voice in her greeting soft and faintly husky.

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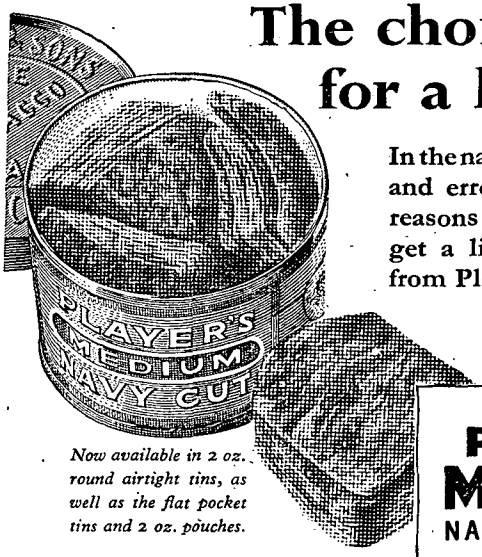


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Then she turned to the Colonel. " Is that all, sir? "

" No," this was through puffs of smoke after work with the new box. " I want to be in peace for an hour, with no chance of any listening. Are you going to work your machine out there, or shall I use the other method? "

" I would like to go out and have a cup of tea, sir."

" Right, off you go then, and take Sergeant Holman with you. Let the latch down on the outer door." Then, as she turned to leave: " There's one other thing, you two—" he pointed with the stem of his pipe—" may be working a lot together, so you had better get to know each other as soon as possible. Conway is taking you out to dinner tonight, Tania." He looked at me: " That's an order," he said.

I burst out laughing. She stared at the Colonel, a faint flush spreading up her cheeks. " Is that an order for me too, *sir* ? " she said. The accent on the last word was very noticeable.

" It is," said the Colonel cheerfully, " and, because of it, the dinner can be put down to expenses."

At that, two dimples dented the corners of her mouth and she started laughing too.

" In that case," she said, " if Major Conway will call for me at eight-thirty, I shall wear my best frock and we shall go and find the most expensive dinner Teheran can provide."

After she had gone and we heard the outer door slam, Mackenzie said: " She was a very lucky find; speaks five languages fluently, a first-rate typist, and on top of that a very intelligent woman."

His eyes darted to me.

" You will find her very good company, a beautiful dancer, and she won't go to bed with you. Fair enough? "

" Fair enough," I said.

" The other thing," he went on, " is that she only calls me ' sir ' when she is annoyed with me or in front of the right people; you had better follow suit. I'm Sandy—what's your name? "

" Bill," I said. He got up again and went to the door of his room; opening this, he crossed the outside office and tested the outer door to see if it were firmly latched. Then he disappeared into the bathroom. When he came out, there was the continuous sound of running water.

" Lesson number one," he said. " A running tap is an excellent antidote for eavesdropping." He unhooked the telephone. " Now pull up your chair so that I can talk quietly."

I edged my chair to the corner of his desk; the Colonel—Sandy—examined the bowl of his pipe, knocked it out, and then began to refill from the blue packet. He stopped in the middle of this operation, cocking his head on one side, looking at me.

" Sure you want to do this? "

" Yes."

" Without knowing what I will ask of you? "

" Yes." To hell with Ahwaz, the heat, and all I had tried to do; to hell with the Friends of Iran, too.

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"That's settled, then. All that I say now is confidential. Understood?"

"Of course."

The cloud of tobacco smoke hung round his head, twisting in blue snaky layers across the sunlight.

"Before I tell you what you will have to do," he began, "I must give you the background. I don't like talking, so, for God's sake, sit still, listen, and keep your questions to the end.

"I'll start with the 'I' branch, though I'm not going to give you a lecture on our duties. You know that our job is to collect facts, military and political, through agents, collate them, and, on the general plan and picture, initiate action that will help our own war effort and impede that of others. On the face of it, the main thing is to see that your stuff gets through, to keep the country quiet enough to let it, and to sit on any ideas to the contrary."

He shifted in his chair. "On top of that, to find out what the hell the Russians really are playing at."

I opened my mouth, then shut it, remembering the edict of no questions.

"Yes," he said, "you were going to say that all they want is to get the stuff. On the surface, they do; but beneath is a far, far deeper game. I wish to God I knew what it was. Then sometimes I feel that I'm glad that I don't, for the knowledge of it might make my hair stand on end. Especially with this other thing," he added, half to himself.

He got up, pipe clenched between his teeth, and he walked up and down in front of the window, still throwing words at me.

"When the war started, our previous spheres of influence became zones of military occupation and we remain, as on other fronts, unfriendly and suspicious—allies by force of circumstances only.

"Unfortunately, we did not entirely get rid of some of the trouble-makers; we collared the smaller fry and interned them, but the hard core got away into the mountains of the south. We know that they have wireless and have been reinforced by parachute. It is like looking for a needle in a haystack to try and catch them there.

"Their aims seem to be as follows: first, to discover and hinder our general Middle East strategy and our aid to Russia. Secondly, to set the allies against each other. Finally, to inflame the tribes against the central government, by encouraging their former independence.

"At the moment," he went on, "we think their headquarters is somewhere south-west of Isfahan—in a thousand square miles of mountains without any proper roads and only a few tracks. That puts them in Quashgai territory and this is confirmed by the fact that they have been giving the most trouble lately.

"The Quashgai are a different story," he continued. "They are very strong in numbers, still feudal in habits, and refuse to pay taxes or take the slightest notice of the central government. They

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are also completely contemptuous of the Persian Army and its attempts to subdue them.

" They may get more cheeky and have a crack at us—and with terrorist encouragement, they could give us a lot of trouble. There have been minor reports of disturbances near the oil wells in the foothills. It is only a hundred miles from there to Abadan, and if they got bold enough to have a go at that, you know what it would mean to us."

He lit up once more; the pile of match-sticks was growing steadily beside him in the ashtray.

" So you can see," he said, " the sort of things we are up against. I have been looking for a kind of second-in-command, someone who can be in the field for me, who can think like me and will obey broad directives but use real initiative where necessary. Originally, you were suggested for one particular job; there's not much to that one except that it is important, and might be dangerous. You can do it, anyway, but my thoughts are of later on. If you fit, and I think you will, there is not much time before things get—" he hesitated, " very complex. I must have someone soon."

" When do I start? " I said.

" In two or three days. I'll brief you on this first job later. First, there is a hell of a lot of homework to get through; codes, agents, and other tricks of the trade. You must know these before I can let you loose anywhere."

He leant back and stretched. " Now, the questions! "

" I've only two," I said. " But first I want to tell you of something that happened the day before yesterday." I took the Russian paper from my pocket and launched into the tale of the body and the truck in the desert. He listened with reasonable attention, asked a few questions, and wrote down the vehicle number on his pad. Then he picked up the paper and made a face at it. " Tania can have a crack at this; her Russian is very good," he said. He tossed it into one of his trays. He did not seem particularly interested.

" The first question is, shall I be employed as a civilian? "

He shook his head. " No, you are fine in your present role; you can go anywhere in uniform, and it will give you that little extra authority and protection. Nominally, you will still command your Company."

I had saved the best one till last. I pulled out that stiff white card, and put it down in front of him.

" Sandy," I said, " who are the Friends of Iran? "

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**Rules of Entry on page 72**

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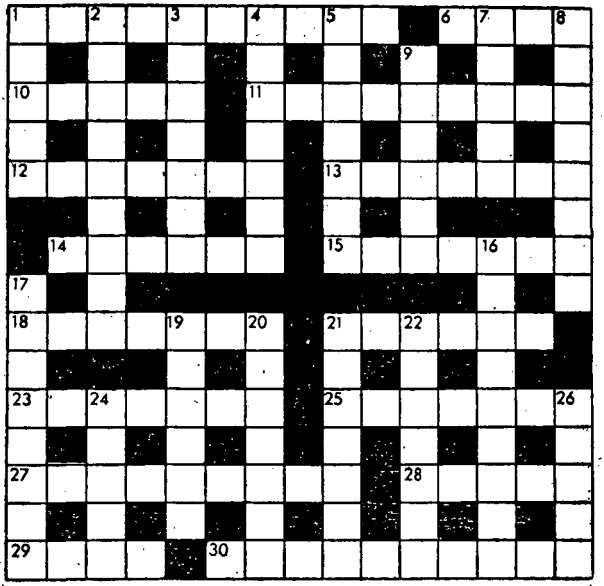

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CUT ALONG THIS LINE

## CLUES

### Across

1 It sounds like a whiff of gun-smoke, but it's a feminine weapon (6-4).

6 What the American exclaimed when he saw the double-curved arch? (4).

10 A fish on ice (5).

11 Slowly laundering the underwear ? (9).

12 A levelling time of day (7).

13 Don't smoke a cigar with this negligent air (7).

14 The French fish, slightly reduced, becomes inedible (6).

15 This famous horse certainly did his contemporaries ! (7).

18 Exaggerate openly about a little account (7).

21 This oppressor would fatigue a proverbial worker (6).

23 Useful boat for a smoker (7).

25 " 'Tis not in mortals to —success " (Addison) (7).

27 The N.C.O. receives a slight addition and becomes embodied (9).

28 It's shaky—like a quill (5).

29 Their inmates have a notorious family resemblance (4).

30 A chilly regiment (10).

### Down

1 Sticky artificial jewellery (5).

2 Elbow a hen out of the way—still stays there ! (9).

3 Wolsey said that God, rightly served, would not have left him to these (7).

4 This many-sided affair suggests that the parrot has departed (7).

5 A sort of music is evidently the food of a sort of lover (7).

7 You can do it to pepper, teeth, and some organs (5).

8 Gin, Renee ? It'll make a mechanic out of you (8).

9 Make a Manx cat normal and sell it (6).

16 A fruit, growing on a tree it doesn't grow on, makes another (9).

17 The paper for a dunce (8).

19 I interrupt a suburban historian to bring a lawsuit (6).

20 What a to-do about unravelled rep ! Quite explosive (7).

21 Let Dick be pushed about; apparently it amused him (7).

22 Batter this section of the fortifications (7).

24 If you colour up like this it's not surprising that the bull showed his disapproval (5).

26 I mend this fabric (5).

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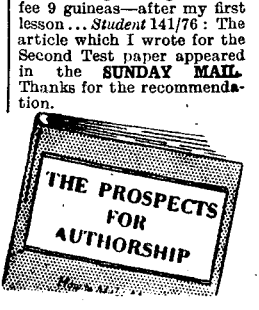


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